Pregnancy Without Birth

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Pregnancy Without Birth

A Feminist Philosophy of Miscarriage

Victoria Browne

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For my sister, Kath

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Preface

I first started to think philosophically about pregnancy when my sister experienced a stillbirth at seven months pregnant.[1] At the time I was working my way through the canon of existential philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, and the way they take birth for granted, as simply an existential precondition, appeared to me as breath-taking arrogance.[2] Feminist philosophy has provided a strong corrective to the traditional philosophical disinterest in pregnancy by putting 'the body that births' at the heart of its agenda,[3] but has routinely excluded and marginalized pregnancies that end in miscarriage or stillbirth. So I began to wonder what would happen if we tried to conceptually disconnect 'pregnancy' from 'birth' by rethinking pregnancy from the perspective of miscarriage.

A while after starting this project, I experienced a very early miscarriage myself, a couple of years after my first child was born. In my case, it was a briefly unsettling, but not life-altering, event, and in fact I didn't count it as a 'proper' miscarriage at all. It certainly didn't seem appropriate to include it in this book, as I felt that doing so would be laying claim to an experience I had not *really* been through. But I came to see that this logic revealed an unconscious subscription to the increasingly predominant representation of miscarriage as 'the loss of a baby' that will produce grief and trauma. This framing does give many people a vital sense of social recognition and validation; but it also has the effect of sidelining miscarriages that are not experienced this way, thus erasing the huge variability and ambiguity of miscarriage as an embodied phenomenon. So I have opted to include my brush with miscarriage here after all, but I want to emphasize that this is intended in the spirit of feminist candour, and not to qualify my interest in the subject. Indeed, one of the core arguments in the book is that miscarriage must be treated as a feminist issue that concerns us all, not only those personally affected by it.[4] And though I have focused primarily on miscarriage rather than stillbirth, my ultimate hope is that this book will contribute to the 'full-spectrum' understanding of pregnancy, which seeks to break down pregnancy hierarchies and presumed divisions – between pregnancy, miscarriage, stillbirth, live birth and abortion – in the interest of building inclusive intersectional alliances in the struggle for reproductive justice and freedom.

Introduction

Pregnancy is a complex bodily phenomenon with multiple possible meanings and endings. Yet so often, pregnancy is deemed significant solely because of the baby it is expected to produce.[1] Think, for example, of the 'Baby on board!' badges that Transport for London provides for pregnant people to wear while travelling.[2] The message to fellow travellers to offer up their seats is centred upon the imagined 'baby' who is figured as a passenger in its own right. This is what gives the call for consideration and care its emotional appeal, surpassing the needs of the one who is pregnant at that time and place.

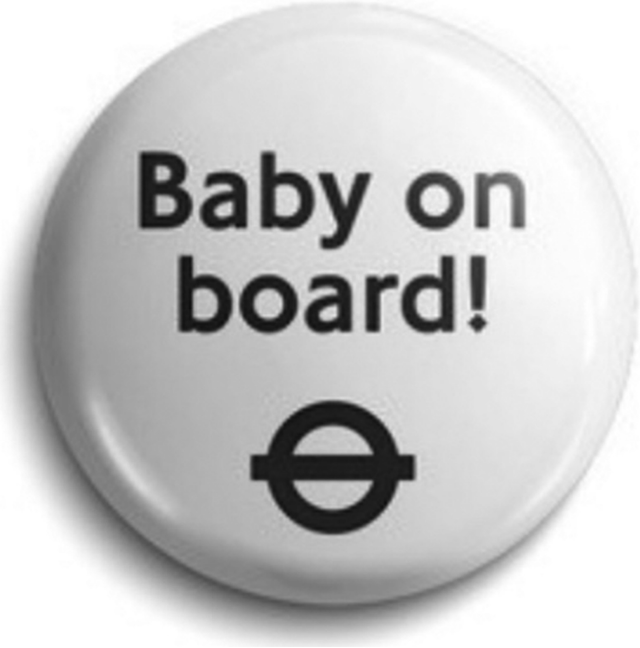

Figure 1 'Baby on board!' badge image, Transport for London, 2022.[3]

To be sure, many pregnant people do relate to their foetuses as their babies or children, engaging in material and social practices that interpellate them as such. And many who wear the 'Baby on board!' badges embrace their pregnancies being represented in this way. But as feminists have long argued, the externally imposed logic that treats foetuses as already separate beings with interests, even rights, of their own, comes with serious consequences for pregnant people when their well-being is rendered secondary or merely instrumental, particularly those whose lives are already socially devalued by systemic racism, ableism and poverty. At best, it frames the pregnant person in sentimentalized terms as a 'carrier' or 'holder' of the future, and at worst, as a dangerous subject who jeopardizes that future and requires levels of regulation, discipline and intervention which in other situations would be considered a gross breach of bodily integrity. Another consequence is that pregnancies which do not lead to the birth of a living baby – due to abortion, miscarriage or stillbirth – are cast outside the world of normative pregnancy altogether, and consistently shrouded in shame, stigma, silence or suspicion. Abortion is much more prominent as a feminist issue than miscarriage and stillbirth, as anti-abortion politics constitute such a blatantly oppressive attempt to control women's bodies and reproductive lives. But attitudes towards miscarriage and stillbirth are similarly shaped by conventional ideas about productivity, femininity, maternity and social value. When pregnancy is presumed to be all about birth and babies, a pregnancy that ends without a live birth can appear only as a failure, or a waste of time – indeed, as not proper to pregnancy at all.

The aim of this book is to extricate pregnancy from its over-association with birth and futurity via a feminist philosophy of miscarriage. The core argument is that bringing miscarriage to the foreground – against its usual positioning as an aberration or an afterthought – can do important work in disentangling pregnancy from birth as its normative futural horizon, because the imagined future of 'the child' is extinguished quite literally, and usually unexpectedly. When pregnancy ends with 'no baby to show for it' (Cancellaro 2001: 163), we are compelled to reckon not only with the damaging effects of discourses that promote birth as pregnancy's 'natural' and 'normal' endpoint, but also with the intractable realities of contingency and ambiguity that are concealed by such discourses. We are forced to consider what pregnancy might amount to besides the production of a child.

Putting miscarriage experiences front and centre, therefore, is valuable to feminist philosophy and politics, not only because such experiences are so often marginalized and misunderstood, but also because they can illuminate important aspects of pregnancy that exceed its gestational function, as we consider more fully what pregnancy can mean, and the different ways it can play out. In other words, when we pay attention to miscarriage, we are not just learning things about miscarriage – we are learning things about pregnancy, and the imaginaries, temporalities and power structures that shape it as symbol and as lived experience. Each chapter of the book takes up a theme that is commonly articulated within personal accounts of miscarriage – a sense of failure; of being out of control yet nevertheless to blame; of being immersed in ambiguity and confusion; of being 'stuck in limbo' or out of time; of resentment and anger as well as solidarity and empathy – and asks what these experiences reveal about the dominant socio-cultural discourses of pregnancy, as well as exploring the alternative understandings that emerge in such times of dislocation and uncertainty.

Centralizing miscarriage, moreover, is a method designed to fully politicize it as a feminist issue. Miscarriage has been thoroughly *depoliticized* through being framed as simply 'nature's way', and as a personal problem that has no wider social significance.[4] In contrast, *politicizing* miscarriage entails critically examining how experiences of miscarriage are embedded within gendered power relations and imaginaries that produce feelings of failure, inadequacy, guilt and shame as *socio-cultural phenomena*, rather than simply private emotions to be managed by the individual (Ahmed 2004: 8–9). It also involves interrogating the profound inequalities that render some pregnancies more socially valued and materially supported than others. This inequality means not only that the overall rate of miscarriage and stillbirth is higher among women of colour and poor women, for example, but also that while the miscarriages of the privileged may be increasingly treated as a grievable and tragic loss, others are all too often dismissed as 'for the best' or vilified as the result of 'poor lifestyle choices', even criminal neglect. Yet to approach miscarriage as a political issue is also to affirm that these power structures are both 'contested and contestable' (Kafer

2013: 9), and that more liberatory discourses and equitable conditions are urgently possible.

The rest of this Introduction focuses on scene-setting and ground-clearing. It firstly sketches out the problematic that *Pregnancy Without Birth* sets itself against: the normative values and temporalities of ‘foetal motherhood’ (Berlant 1994) and ‘reproductive futurism’ (Edelman 2004) and their socio-cultural manifestations in both the UK and the US. It then turns to feminist philosophies of pregnancy, maternity and natality (e.g. Young [1984] 2005; Irigaray 1985a; Kristeva 1986; Cavarero 1995; Battersby 1998; Guenther 2006; Stone 2011), affirming the forceful challenge this body of work has made to patriarchal models of pregnancy as incubation, yet also highlighting the tendency within feminist philosophy to conflate pregnancy with maternity, and to overdetermine the meaning of pregnancy through assumptions of birth and the postnatal future. Accordingly, I suggest, it is feminist philosophies of abortion and miscarriage that offer most potential for shattering the ideological edifices of ‘foetal motherhood’ and ‘reproductive futurism’, and for defining pregnancy as a fundamentally ambiguous and contingent situation[5] – particularly miscarriage which so obviously frustrates teleological models of pregnancy as naturally destined for birth as well as neoliberal models of pregnancy as an object of control determined by individual choice.[6] What is the value, meaning or significance of a pregnancy that ends without a choice or a child?

Finally, the Introduction explains the book’s transdisciplinary methodology, and makes some terminological clarifications pertaining to ‘miscarriage’, ‘stillbirth’, ‘pregnancy loss’, ‘pregnant people’ and ‘pregnant women’.

Foetal motherhood and reproductive futurism

Every year in the UK and the US, millions of people become pregnant. The majority of pregnancies result in live births, but a significant number end differently, through abortion, miscarriage or stillbirth.[7] Current estimates, for example, suggest that 10–20 per cent of known pregnancies end in miscarriage.[8] Pregnancy statistics are contestable and imprecise,[9] but they do signify the variety of possible outcomes as well as the intersecting factors that condition pregnancy as a lived situation, including gender, class, race, age, religion, sexuality, citizenship, language, housing, income, education, employment, physical capacity, mental health, social networks, intimate relationships and reproductive histories. The diverse and dynamic realities of pregnancy, however, are consistently swallowed up by a suite of homogeneous representations that reduce the pregnant person to one who is 'carrying' or 'expecting', even to a 'maternal environment' that must be optimized. As Kelly Oliver argues, 'the pregnant body' is highly visible as a cipher, or a metaphor for other types of transformation, but the subjective experiences of pregnant people themselves are consistently rendered marginal or invisible (2012: 207).

Various iterations of this kind of argument have been made by feminists over the past four decades, especially in relation to the impact of ultrasound scanning technology, and the appearance of the fetishized 'public fetus' as a ubiquitous image in mass culture and politics (e.g. Petchesky 1987; Franklin 1991; Hartouni 1992; Berlant 1994; Harraway 1997; Morgan and Michaels 1999; Dubow 2011; Gentile 2014; Mills 2014). The 'teleological construction of the foetus', as Sarah Franklin explains, inscribes the time of pregnancy as a singular trajectory of linear progress aligned to the foetus's expected biological development (1991: 197–200). The *lived time* of the pregnant person is thereby collapsed into the *gestational time* of the foetus, as the standardized temporal markers and milestones – the successive weeks, months and trimesters – serve as a one-way 'countdown' to birth (Scuro 2017: 234; see also Beynon-Jones 2016). Foetocentric pregnancy narratives also take on a proleptic structure when the foetus is treated as a separate 'baby-person' already, even a citizen bearing rights (Katz Rothman 1986). As a result, the present situation of pregnancy becomes subordinated to the projected future – be that the hopeful future symbolized by the foetus-as-child, or the catastrophic future that 'motivates action and meaning-making in the present' through the management of risk (Gentile 2014: 291). Pregnant time, then, is not only represented as developmental and progressive but also as a time of containment: a time that both holds the future in the present yet simultaneously serves as a potential block to its realization.

Lauren Berlant coined the term ‘fetal motherhood’ to capture the way that the foetus is presented in advance as a separate individual, and the pregnant person as ‘already a mother embarked on a life trajectory of mothering’ (1994: 148). According to this logic, the pregnant person is expected to ‘act like a mother’ to the foetus, but at the same time is effectively made a ‘child to the fetus’, through the de-legitimation of their agency and identity as they become ‘more minor and less politically represented than the fetus’ (1994: 147; see also Bordo 1993; Ruddick 2007; Baird 2008).[10] More recently, Jennifer Scuro has proposed the term ‘childbearing teleology’ to refer to ‘the scripts and rituals that underwrite socio-political, gendered, and embodied expectations about pregnancy’, domesticating the possible phenomenal content of pregnant embodiment by validating only its productive aspects, and presuming pregnancy to be ‘all directed for the sake of a child produced’ (2017: 189). Childbearing teleology is exercised through a ‘medical and cultural complex of guidance and instruction’ (2017: 189) – for instance, in popular pregnancy books where the foetus ‘talks’ to the imagined pregnant reader:

> When I first opened The Healthy Pregnancy Book … I was startled by an image … There on the second page was a gray, delicately shaded pencil illustration of a baby nestled cosily in a womb, its arms and legs crossed. A thought bubble emanated from the baby, carrying a firm message: ‘Mama take good care of yourself so I can grow better’. I was only eight weeks pregnant (my fetus was kidney-bean size …), and yet here was this fully formed baby admonishing me for mistakes I was already making. ‘Do you really want to eat that’? the baby asked incredulously on page 54.
>
> (Garbes 2018: 19)

The model of pregnancy as ‘foetal motherhood’ can generate significant levels of social approval for those who fulfil the ‘happy-glowing-pregnant-lady myth’ and are seen to behave appropriately (Faulkner 2012: 336). As Maggie Nelson writes in *The Argonauts*: ‘You are holding the future; one must be kind to the future (or at least a certain image of the future, which I apparently appeared able to deliver …)’ (2015: 90).[11] But pregnancy can also be the source of acute social shaming and censure in the case of those whose reproductivity is deemed a threat to social or national futures (Davis 1981; Roberts 1997; Deutscher 2016; Ross et al. 2017; Millar 2018). The figure of the 'pregnant teen', for example, or the 'pregnant immigrant', are ubiquitous symbols of demonized reproduction, along with pregnant bodies of all ages marked by disability, conspicuous queerness, racialized otherness or a whiteness 'contaminated by poverty' (Tyler 2008: 30). 'Stratified reproduction' is a concept widely used within feminist theory to describe the 'power relations by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered' (Ginsberg and Rapp 1995: 3; see also Colen 1986). Such stratifications have a long history of state programmes of forced/coerced sterilization, abortion and contraception, as well as punitive welfare systems designed to prevent the 'wrong' kind of reproduction. Dorothy Roberts, for example, examines cases in the 1980s and 90s of Black pregnant women in the US who tested positive for drugs being given the 'choice' of abortion or prison (1997: 181).[12] Or as Lisa Guenther documents, between 2006 and 2010, nearly 150 women were unlawfully sterilized in California prisons – a practice defended by prison medical staff as a 'service to taxpayers', and even to the women themselves, as a way of preventing the birth of 'unwanted children' (2016: 217).[13]

Contemporary discourses of what Kelly Ray Knight describes as 'soft eugenics' (2015: 210) are couched in the language of 'dysfunctional communities', 'problem families' (Millar 2018: 231) or 'anti-socials' (Salem 2018; Shilliam 2018). But as Laura Briggs argues, the logic of public benefits and state-mandated private benefits in the US is 'precisely eugenic', when, as a matter of law and regulation, 'insurers pay for the poor to get birth control and the rich to get IVF' (2017: 108).[14] At the same time, there has been a significant rise in arrests and prosecutions of women under laws such as 'child endangerment' or 'fetal homicide' in cases of criminalized miscarriage/stillbirth. Lynn Paltrow and Jeanne Flavin report that in the US between 1973 and 2005, 413 recorded arrests and forced interventions were made, and those targeted were overwhelmingly low-income (71 per cent) and disproportionately women of colour (59 per cent) (2013: 311; see also Callahan and Knight 1993).[15] Since then, the National Advocates for Pregnant Women have recorded 1,254 more such cases in the US between 2006 and 2020 (NAPW 2021a). In the UK, criminal punishment and forced interventions are much rarer, though there have been some troubling high-profile instances. In 2012, for example, Essex social services obtained a court order to enforce a C-section on a pregnant woman suffering from bipolar disorder without her consent, and subsequently sent her back to her country of residence and put the baby up for adoption (Hamilton 2013).[16]

It may seem contradictory that the same groups of people whose reproduction is marked as deviant are more likely to be punished or subjected to state intervention when their pregnancies are deemed 'at risk', or end without a live birth. But this apparent contradiction only lays bare how the professed concern for 'the child' functions as a smokescreen or 'cover story' for wider political agendas and exercises of control (Briggs 2017: 71).[17] Indeed, the groups most subjected to heightened surveillance and forced interventions, as Laura Woliver points out, overall continue to experience the highest levels of miscarriage, stillbirth and pregnancy-related death (2008).[18] One large study conducted in 2013, for example, shows that the rate of miscarriage for Black women in the US is around 57 per cent higher overall and 93 per cent higher after week 10 of pregnancy than the rate for white women (Mukherjee et al. 2013; see also Chatterjee and Davis 2017).[19] In the UK, statistics published in 2020 show that like in the US, where Black women die from pregnancy- or childbirth-related causes at three to four times the rate of white women, 'there remains a more than fourfold difference in maternal mortality rates amongst women from Black ethnic backgrounds and an almost twofold difference amongst women from Asian ethnic backgrounds compared to white women' (MBRRACE UK 2020: iii).[20] And a report published in November 2021 by the UK National Maternity and Perinatal Audit estimates that 24 per cent of stillbirths, 19 per cent of preterm births and 31 per cent of foetal growth restriction (FGR) cases are attributable to socio-economic and racial inequality. It projects that 'half of stillbirths (53.5 per cent) and seven in ten FGR cases (71.7 per cent) among South Asian women living in the most deprived fifth of neighbourhoods in England could be avoidable if they had the same risks as white women in the most affluent fifth', and that 'this was similarly the case for nearly two-thirds of stillbirths (63.7 per cent) and half of FGR cases (55 per cent) among Black women from the most deprived neighbourhoods' (Gregory 2021).[21]

There are strong points of resonance between feminist critiques of 'stratified reproduction' and regimes of 'foetal motherhood' and

Lee Edelman's influential indictment of 'reproductive futurism' and its central figure: the imaginary 'Child' to which heteronormative politics defers as a symbol of innocence to be protected. Though it is usually presumed 'self-evident' that any kind of progressive politics is ultimately oriented towards the future and 'fighting for the children' (2004: 2), Edelman's analysis in *No Future* demonstrates how sentimentalized representations of the imaginary future 'Child' in fact serve to consolidate the social injustices of the status quo: by holding us 'in thrall' to 'a future continually deferred by time itself' (2004: 30), while vilifying those positioned outside or against the heteronormative fantasy of 'the future' staked upon linear developmental time and reproductive continuity. Edelman's own focus is the figure of the queer man or the 'sinthomosexual' as 'non-reproducer'; and pregnant people, indeed women in general, barely feature in *No Future*. Critics including Alison Kafer and Jose Esteban Muñoz have also highlighted how the text overlooks the ableism and racism inherent to reproductive futurism, as the figure of the 'Child' of the future is so consistently coded as 'always already white … healthy and nondisabled' (Kafer 2013: 32–3; Muñoz 2009: 95). But despite these limitations, Edelman's analysis of the symbolism and political function of the 'Child' can augment feminist interrogations of 'foetal motherhood' and its damaging effects upon pregnant people (and actual children) in the present. 'The pregnant woman', as Penelope Deutscher contends, 'can certainly be added to [Edelman's] account of those held hostage … to reproductive futurism' (2016: 51). Extending the argument, Deutscher proposes that the fantasy of the 'Child' also stimulates fantasies of the 'Pregnant Woman' as its counterpart, who can appear in the guise of the 'Good Mother' who will deliver the future that the imaginary 'Child' is made to stand for, or the 'Bad Mother' who jeopardizes this future's materialization. 'The Child of the Future', she writes, 'is associated with this concurrent imaginary pregnant mother, whether her role is highly visible, fetishized, or invisible in the teleology of the Child's value' (2016: 51).

To counter what might seem to be an excessively gloomy portrait of contemporary pregnancy, it is important to acknowledge the multiple ways in which normative models of 'foetal motherhood' and 'reproductive futurism' are challenged, undermined and simply ignored. Various feminist analyses of gestational surrogacy, for example, highlight ways that this practice can decouple pregnancy from naturalized motherhood in the political and popular imagination, thus expanding understandings of kin-making practices (see e.g. Teman 2010; Jacobson 2016; Lewis 2019). We might also think of the increasing public visibility of trans and nonbinary pregnancy, particularly 'the spectacle of the pregnant man and the potential challenge it poses to heterosexual, binary gendered notions of reproduction' (Toze 2018: 203; see also Halberstam 2010).[22] At the same time, however, scholarship on surrogacy and multi-gendered pregnancy also demonstrates how resilient the model of pregnancy as a 'straight line' from conception to birth can be, and moreover, the patriarchal understanding of the pregnant body as 'host' to an imagined future child that is already granted conceptual autonomy. Yasmine Ergas, for example, argues that recent discourse and jurisprudence on commercial surrogacy routinely ignores the lived experience and situation of pregnant surrogates, and has reinforced the idea of pregnancy as a production process or 'service' whose value and significance lies solely in the expected child as 'product' (2017: 110–12). Pregnant surrogates may not be enlisted as 'mother' to the foetus, but they are nevertheless consistently rendered subordinate to its projected future as well as the interests of the intending parents, particularly when there is a serious imbalance of power and wealth (see e.g. Pande 2014; Vora 2015).[23]

Further, whilst the symbolism of masculine or nonbinary pregnancy transgresses gender norms, the sensationalism that has surrounded the phenomenon of 'the pregnant man' suggests that male pregnancy is still far 'outside the frame of social recognition', even 'socially unthinkable' (Toze 2018: 204). Indeed, Michael Toze points to concern that has been expressed within some trans male/masculine communities about the potentially negative effect of trans pregnancy upon social validation: 'how can anyone take us seriously as men, if some of us get pregnant?' (2018: 204). Much more research is needed into the ways that pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, stillbirth and live birth are experienced by those who do not occupy a conventionally feminine hetero cis-normative social position and identity.[24] But there are signs that gendered notions of the pregnant body as unruly and the pregnant mind as irrational – and hence in need of paternalistic regulation and intervention – do carry over into the treatment of pregnant people who are not women. For instance, the headline-attracting pregnancy of Thomas Beatie in the US in 2008 was the subject of much disapproving public ‘concern’ that the foetus might be negatively affected by testosterone use – he was condescendingly instructed by an obstetrician via a television network that it was ‘really important’ that he did not take any testosterone during the pregnancy – and that the future child would be ‘confused’ later in life about their parental situation (Barkham 2008; see also Grigorovich 2014).

So while it is crucial to highlight and engage with all the ways that non-normative practices, discourses and imagery continue to subvert dominant ideals and generate alternatives, the insistent promotion of normative pregnancy remains a major problem for feminists to struggle against. Cultural inscriptions of the docile pregnant body seem as forceful as ever, as pregnant people are instructed how to sleep, eat, walk and even think during pregnancy (Brooks-Gardner 2003); and in legal and medical contexts, pregnant people have been treated ‘more and more … as sites for fetal growth, or worse yet, barriers to fetal care’ (Katz Rothman 1986: 264). The persistence of the sacrificial narrative is well illustrated in the latest edition of the widely read pregnancy manual *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*, which suggests that while this edition has not altered its references to ‘traditional family relationships’, the reader themselves can simply ‘mentally edit out’ any term or phrase that does not match their own set-up and ‘replace it with one that’s right for you and your loving family’ (Murkhoff 2017: 19). The author is thus confident that there is no need to make significant changes to the text – that even if the reader ‘mentally’ switches the central terms around, the narration of the ‘pregnancy journey’ can stay essentially the same.

Feminist philosophies of pregnancy and maternity

Contemporary representations of ‘the foetus’ as an individual being in its own right depend significantly upon the foetal imagery provided by ultrasound technology, which may give the impression that such depictions are a recent phenomenon. Yet from a feminist philosophical perspective, the ‘foetal narratives’ that circulate through vectors such as commercial pregnancy guidebooks, national healthcare pamphlets and the speech of politicians can be viewed as the latest iteration of a much older problematic. Imogen Tyler, for example, argues that the historical canon of Western philosophy has operated on the basis of exactly the same disavowal of pregnant subjectivity and embodiment as the foetal narratives we encounter today. Indeed, she writes, 'the foetus is, simply put, the most recent reincarnation of the figure of the philosopher' (2000: 300) – an atomized masculinized subject entirely disconnected from the bodily relations and labour that sustain him.

This idea has been central to the work of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, for example, who write of pregnant embodiment as the forgotten originary site of subjectivity and corporeal existence.[25] 'Mother-matter', claims Irigaray, makes possible the individuals which populate the Western symbolic order and cultural imaginary, and yet is essentially unthinkable within their terms (1985a: 162).[26] The pregnant body cannot conform to masculine principles of individuality, non-contradiction and singular temporality. It exists, as Tyler puts it, as a 'question' within a 'philosophical landscape of stable forms' (2000: 292). Yet it also poses a threat to this metaphysical system and the fantasy of self-sufficiency and 'coming-from-nothing' (Stone 2007: 181), because it exposes the fragilities of patriarchal individualism and its dependence upon that which it would erase. Political anxieties over pregnant bodies can thus be said to incorporate philosophical anxieties over the very boundaries of 'self' and 'other', 'mind' and 'matter', as the figure of the pregnant person represents 'the ever-present possibility of sliding back into the corporeal abyss from which [we] were formed' (Grosz 1994: 198; see also Shildrick 2001: 31).

Since feminist philosophy has become consolidated as a scholarly field, pregnant embodiment has frequently been construed as a paradigmatic phenomenon of 'multiple embodiment' that offers a route out of patriarchal metaphysics and individualist politics by revealing our intercorporeal intertwinement more generally. Feminist philosophers have also been concerned to restore subjectivity to pregnancy and reframe the pregnant person as 'the site of her proceedings' (Kristeva 1986: 237) rather than a 'container' for foetal development. Against the medical model of pregnancy as a 'state of the developing fetus' or an objective 'condition' to be treated, and against the economic model that calibrates value according to what will be produced or 'delivered', feminists have sought to 'give voice' to the pregnant subject and attest to that ‘wild oxymoron – a pregnant person who thinks’ (Young [1984] 2005; Nelson 2015: 91). They have promoted a way of thinking about pregnancy not as a production process and instead as a unique way of being in the world.

Feminist philosophy, of course, is not a homogeneous bloc. Some feminists do propagate a model of the autonomous bounded self (pregnant or otherwise), while others disagree over the extent to which the pregnant subject should be considered ‘undone’ by the blurred boundaries of pregnant embodiment. In Kristeva’s account, for instance, pregnancy is a ‘place of splitting’ where the pregnant subject finds herself alienated from her own flesh in a kind of delirium (Kristeva 1986: 238). If a pregnant person does retain a sense of bodily integrity and unified identity, Kristeva proposes, this is due to a kind of false or ‘closed’ consciousness that comes with the habitual thinking of the self as ‘one’ (see also Ziarek 1999).[27] Elizabeth Grosz, however, argues that Kristeva’s account of the pregnant body accepts too quickly the ‘overtaking of women’s corporeality and identity by a foreign body, an alien intruder’ (1990: 162); and Lisa Guenther similarly suggests that the very possibility of alienation in pregnancy ‘suggests there is always already a difference between mother and child even in the very midst of ambiguity’ (2006: 26).[28] But though there are certainly differences and disagreements, feminist philosophy offers up a host of powerful resources for countering the treatment of the foetus as an already separate individuated being and the pregnant person as an ‘identity machine for others, producing children in the name of the future’ (Berlant 1994: 147).

Having said this, however, feminist philosophy of pregnancy has consistently been criticized for making universalizing assumptions about the experience of ‘the pregnant subject’ – an inheritance from both the psychoanalytic and phenomenological traditions from which it has drawn. As in so many other areas of feminist enquiry, white middle-class women’s experiences have been universalized via claims about how ‘the pregnant subject experiences herself’ or under-examined ideas of a ‘typical’ pregnancy (Mullin 2005: 45). For instance, while the effects of capitalist ideologies of productivity upon imaginaries of pregnancy, reproduction and kinship are not lost on Irigaray (1985b), the effects of racial logics and power structures are never grappled with in her work (Ziarek 2010: 210).[29] Further, as Caroline Lundquist points out, for the pregnant subject who never positively accepts her pregnancy, the sense of 'splitting subjectivity' described by Kristeva and others can be 'radically unlike the experiential mother-child differentiation of chosen pregnancy … a chiasm not of two subjects, but rather of a subject and some unwanted or menacing object, some less than human, perhaps monstrous creature, or the embodiment of the aggressor, in pregnancies resulting from rape' (2008: 145).

There has also been a lack of recognition that the right and capacity to become pregnant and have children has been systematically obstructed or denied to disabled and economically/racially subordinated groups. The 'reproductive justice' framework developed by Black feminists in the 1990s emphasizes that the right to reproduce, and 'to parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities', must be defended as much as the right *not* to be pregnant and give birth; and since then, as Loretta Ross outlines, it 'has impressively built bridges between activists and the academy to stimulate thousands of scholarly articles' (2017: 286). But white feminist philosophy has on the whole focused more on the political project of 'resist[ing] compulsory maternity at the expense of fighting anti-natalism' (Jones et al. 2014). Another issue is that while opposing compulsory maternity, feminist philosophical writings on pregnancy have nevertheless tended to treat 'the pregnant body' and 'the maternal body' as interchangeable terms.[30] This equation of pregnancy and maternity, as Jane Lymer argues, ends up 'maternalizing' all pregnancy experiences including abortion, which gets coded as an 'opting out' of maternity even as it is defended as an essential recourse (2016: 20). Adriana Cavarero, for example, describes the 'full power both to generate and not to generate' as a 'maternal power' (1995: 64).[31]

What is particularly pertinent to the concerns of this book is the related tendency within feminist philosophy to overdetermine the meaning of pregnancy in light of birth and the postnatal future it is imagined to generate.[32] Guenther, for example, suggests that for the pregnant subject who decides to stay pregnant, pregnancy is characterized primarily by the force of the anticipated but unknowable future of the child which 'makes the woman a mother' (2006: 3).[33] To be clear, Guenther insists that the time of pregnancy and the time of gestation must be understood as distinct, though intertwined, thereby articulating a powerful philosophical refutation of the 'foetal motherhood' ideology: 'It is precisely not as a vessel that the maternal body is maternal; the relation between mother and child is not … a relation of containment but of inspiration by an Other' (2006: 101). The futural force Guenther evokes, moreover, is disruptive, elusive and discontinuous with the present, and therefore emphatically different to the teleological future of 'reproductive futurism'. 'The future of the child to whom the pregnant woman will someday give birth', she writes, 'does not quite belong to her, even if it does implicate her in a future of responsibility …' (2006: 100). Nevertheless, though insightful and innovative in so many ways, Guenther's analysis here does seem to imply that the temporality of the pregnant person is structured by the future of the child above all else, even as that future is theorized as open and unpredictable.

This accent on the future or futurity is common across feminist philosophy, which can have the effect of sidelining all those aspects of pregnancy that have little or nothing to do with imagined futures or parent–child relations (Mullin 2005: 36). It also leaves us uncertain about how to interpret the significance of a miscarried pregnancy whereby a maternal 'future of responsibility' is foreclosed. As Oliver points out, the imagined futurity of pregnant embodiment 'may just highlight the "empty promise" of a future that, for whatever reason – and there are many – does not lead to childbirth' (2010: 773).[34] To make this kind of critique is not to repudiate the future-oriented features of pregnancy: the reckoning with possible postpregnancy futures; the planning and preparing; the affective intensities of anticipation, expectation, speculation, hope and longing, as well as anxiety, fear or dread. It is also not to deny the fact that attachment to a newborn infant often 'flows out' of attachment to the foetus during pregnancy (Stone 2007: 168).[35] My argument, rather, is that pregnancy has been so thoroughly assimilated to birth, maternity and futurity that there is analytical and political value in trying to disaggregate these terms and consider pregnancy as an embodied situation in its own right – through a conceptual suspension or 'bracketing' of the presumption of birth and postnatal relations.[36]

This is not to say that pregnancy should be understood as an entirely self-enclosed phenomenon; and indeed, it is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to completely disassociate pregnancy from birth and maternity, especially when terms like 'prenatal care' (rather than 'pregnancy care') or 'maternity jeans' (rather than 'pregnancy jeans') anchor pregnancy so firmly to birth and maternity in everyday discourse.

But it does bear emphasizing that being pregnant is not necessarily equivalent to 'having a baby' or being 'with child', and that 'the relational result of gestation is not always "motherhood"' (Lewis 2018: 309). The connections between pregnancy, birth and maternity are certainly not arbitrary, but they *are* contingent, uncertain and variable – a reality that often gets lost within representations of them as interchangeable or as 'moments on an experiential continuum' (LaChance Adams and Lundquist 2013: 21). This book therefore argues for a more thoroughgoing extrication of pregnancy from maternity, futurity and birth in a bid to break the spell of 'foetal motherhood' and 'reproductive futurism', and to give an account of pregnancy as a lived situation that is much more than simply a precondition or build-up to something else.

Rethinking pregnancy through abortion and miscarriage

Above I have said that birth, maternity and the future of the imagined child have overdetermined the meaning of pregnancy within feminist philosophy, but that is not quite true. Feminist philosophers have in fact devoted a lot of attention to pregnancies that do not produce a child, but under the heading of 'abortion' rather than 'pregnancy'. To learn and think about pregnancy, we might not automatically think that the best place to turn is abortion, but feminist writing on abortion provides a lot of insight into the highly variable experiences of pregnancy as a lived situation, precisely because the presumption is that pregnancy might well be terminated. Of course, pregnant people imagine different possible futures when considering abortion. But feminist writing on abortion also pays close attention to the 'here and now' of pregnancy: how it feels to the one who is pregnant and the kinds of circumstances and relations that are entailed.

I have in mind here phenomenological accounts of abortion that place the lived experience of the pregnant person at the centre of their analyses. This contrasts with the dominant analytic approach within abortion ethics, which adopts a rights-based framework and positions the pregnant person and the foetus as separate individuals, even as adversaries, with rights that need to be weighed against each other. For instance, rights-based arguments often proceed by way of analogy, where the relation between the pregnant person and foetus is represented by a relation between two adults, often strangers. Perhaps the most famous example is Judith Jarvis Thomson's thought experiment where a woman wakes to discover that an ailing violinist has been plugged into her circulatory system, and she must decide whether to allow him to remain plugged in for the nine months necessary for him to survive (1971:14). Though Thomson's essay is a defence of the right to abortion, what is written out of analogies like these is the bodily reality of pregnancy – a situation marked by 'a particular, and particularly thoroughgoing, kind of physical intertwinement' (Little 1999: 296). A foetus is not 'contracting with the woman for the use of her body,' as Catriona Mackenzie contends, and a pregnant person's body is not their 'property' (1992: 151). Rather, our bodies are our 'mode of being-in-the-world', and as such, 'a fetus is a being whose existence and welfare are biologically and morally inseparable from the woman in whose body it develops' (1992: 136; see also Sherwin 1991).

Philosophers like Little or MacKenzie who take a phenomenological approach therefore focus upon the 'extraordinary physical enmeshment' of pregnant embodiment as a basis for ethical understandings of abortion as an 'ethics of intimacy'. Like Young, Kristeva and others, they demonstrate not only the absurdity of treating foetuses as separate individuals with rights and interests of their own, but also how pregnant people are 'given over' in pregnancy in ways they can never fully control. Yet what makes this body of work on 'abortion' distinct from much feminist philosophical writing on 'pregnancy' is the attention paid to the enormous variety of ways that pregnant people conceptualize and relate to the foetuses that are sustained by, and intertwined with, their bodies: 'It can be a wonderful intermingling; it can also be an invasive occupation in which the self feels subsumed' (Little 1999: 303). Moreover, there is a strong concern to detach pregnancy from maternity and presumed parenthood. As Little writes, for example:

> Some women feel from the start that they are in a special personal relationship with the growing fetus. They conceptualize themselves as a mother, thickly construed, in relationship with an entity that is 'their child', whatever the further metaphysical details … For others,

> the sense of relationship grows, as most personal relationships do, slowly: the pregnancy begins as mere biological relationship but, as the day-to-day preoccupations of decisions involving the welfare of another … accumulate … she finds herself in a personal relationship. For other women, the relationship is never one of motherhood thickly construed: she is simply in biological relationship with a germinating human organism. For still others, the sense of relationship shifts throughout pregnancy: a conception of motherhood is tried on, then dispatched, or arrives fully formed out of the blue.
>
> (1999: 310)

Phenomenological philosophies of abortion thereby promote an understanding of pregnancy as a highly variable relational phenomenon that should be taken seriously in itself, regardless of its ultimate outcome. Nonetheless, it can be difficult to fully extricate pregnancy from teleological frameworks of meaning when the topic is ‘abortion’, because so often within discussions around abortion, it is the decision about whether to terminate that pulls ultimate focus. The *telos* of childbirth is thus effectively replaced by ‘the decision’ or ‘the choice’ as that which endows pregnancy with purpose and direction. So if a pregnancy ends in childbirth, this is seen as the culmination of the choice to continue, and if it ends in abortion, this can likewise be regarded as the realization of choice. In contrast, pregnancies that end through miscarriage or stillbirth are less easily recuperated within a teleological framework of meaning, because the involuntary ‘spontaneous’ ending of a pregnancy is less likely to be regarded as its culmination, or rightful ending, that retrospectively determines how a pregnancy should be understood.

Teleological narratives of pregnancy do certainly inform how miscarried pregnancies get framed: as pregnancies that have fallen short of their ‘normal’ trajectory or ‘natural’ purpose, and have failed to deliver their expected ‘product’ (to be discussed in Chapter 1); or as pregnancies that were ‘never meant to be’. Likewise, narratives of pregnancy as a matter of individual choice shape the cultural meanings of miscarriage through negation: when the miscarrying person is portrayed as passive and ‘powerless’ through the removal or absence of choice (to be discussed in Chapters 2 and 5). But my proposal here is that reflection on the nonchosen nature of miscarriage brings into view the fundamental contingency of *all* pregnancies, whatever choices have been possible, even when the choices made align with the eventual outcome. After all, aborted pregnancies, just like child-producing pregnancies, could always have ended otherwise (Lind 2017: 148).[37]

Accordingly, the guiding idea of *Pregnancy Without Birth* is that miscarriage should not be treated as an anomaly, or a 'sub-category' within the philosophy of pregnancy, but rather as a 'possibility proper to all pregnant embodiment' (Scuro 2017: 204). This can have a transformative effect because, as Scuro similarly argues, 'if the phenomenon of pregnant embodiment is already bound to the possibility of miscarriage', then we can begin to free up pregnancy from its 'assumed and expected possibilities of child production' (2017: 204). And in so doing, we overturn the persistent idea that 'productive' birth-giving pregnancy is the only kind of pregnancy that really counts (Mullin 2005: 1). This approach can be understood as congruent with scholarship that seeks to *queer* pregnancy, whereby pregnancy is extricated from the stronghold of 'reproductive futurism' and appears instead as an unpredictable mode of embodiment that exceeds and 'skews' the narrow linear visions that would subsume it as symbol and lived experience (Andrzejewski 2018; see also Mamo 2007; Park 2013; Gibson 2014; Summers 2014; Brown 2019).

A challenge for this project, though, is that miscarriage has been 'shockingly under-theorized' from a philosophical and political perspective (Cahill et al. 2015b). A considerable amount of research has been conducted in the fields of psychology and nursing since the 1960s that explores grief, anxiety and depression;[38] and recent texts by feminist psychotherapists discuss how to reframe miscarriage as a transformative experience that can enable emotional growth and self-knowledge (Epstein-Gilboa 2017; Bueno 2019; Zucker 2021). There is also a growing body of research articles, monographs and edited collections within feminist sociology and anthropology,[39] which demonstrate how social context and cultural norms 'dramatically impact the experience and management of miscarriage' (Kilshaw et al. 2017: 2), while also attesting to the wide variation of subjective responses that may be socially and culturally conditioned but are never uniformly determined. Studies based within the US and the UK, for example, show that while for some losing a pregnancy can be a highly traumatic experience as the loss of 'their baby' or 'their child,' for others, the event is of much less significance or has a different meaning (see e.g. Letherby 1993, 165–6; or Frost et al. 2007). But in terms of philosophical and political theory, there has been scant attention beyond a passing mention until the past decade or so, in which dedicated analyses have begun to appear (see e.g. Parsons 2010; Cahill et al. 2015a; Browne 2017, 2018, 2022; Scuro 2017; Deveau and Lind 2017). As feminist writer Alexandra Kimball recounts:

> I wandered around our living room and looked at my bookshelves, the rows of Cixous and Butler and de Beauvoir, and realized that feminism had nothing to say to me. Here, lined up left to right, was sexual assault, abortion, childbirth, body image: but nothing about miscarriage . . . .
>
> (2015)

This relative silence can be attributed to the concern that 'if one were to acknowledge that there was something of value lost, something worth grieving in a miscarriage,' one would be ceding ground to the anti-abortion movement (Layne 1997: 305). The claim that pro-choice feminism straightforwardly dismisses the foetus as a 'bunch of cells' is, as Ann Cahill argues, something of a caricature. Yet it cannot be denied that the continued assault on women's reproductive lives renders 'any attempt at subtlety politically dangerous' (2015: 48). Just as 'speaking as an aborting body … from within abortion can feel impossible' (Doyle 2009: 25), speaking from 'within miscarriage' can feel equally so. Nonetheless, it is imperative that miscarriage is fully embraced as a feminist issue across all disciplinary, advocacy and activist contexts, given how profoundly attitudes towards miscarriage are shaped by patriarchal power structures – including the anti-abortion lobby – and socio-economic, ableist and racialized inequalities.

The rise of what anthropologist Linda Layne describes as the mainstream 'pregnancy loss movement' in the US and the UK (2003) (to be discussed in Chapter 3), clearly attests to the need for public engagement and support networks that enable 'ritual affirmation of a shared experience' (Hardy and Kukla 2015: 114). Yet this movement of 'women's self-help' (Layne 2003: 55) has built up predominantly around the lived experiences of straight white middle-class non-disabled women, resulting in the endemic marginalization of those located outside the realm of cis–het relationships and culturally dominant identity groups (Peel and Cain 2012; see also Gibney and Yang 2019). Further, as Sarah Hardy and Quill Kukla argue, the tropes and symbols which proliferate across pregnancy loss literature, blogs and websites can have 'very formulaic ways of inscribing maternal and "child" identity – as angels with birthdates, for instance – and it is not clear that there is social room for other ways of conceiving the identity, or lack thereof, of a miscarried fetus' (2015: 124). Indeed, while some strands of the pregnancy loss movement are explicitly pro-choice, plenty of groups and individuals are rather quiet on the matter, and others are actively anti-abortion. Feminist philosophy, therefore, needs to marshal its wealth of conceptual resources to construct those alternatives, and push back against assumptions that supporting abortion and miscarriage are incompatible, even opposed, political projects.

Transdisciplinary methodology

The approach I take in this book is 'transdisciplinary': a term that denotes 'a movement across existing fields' and 'locates the source of transdisciplinary dynamics pragmatically in a process of problem-solving related, ultimately, to problems of experience in everyday life' (Osborne 2015: 16).[40] The book draws not only on feminist phenomenological philosophy but also critical disability/crip theory, queer theory and feminist scholarship on the politics of reproduction, as well as existing literature on miscarriage within sociology, anthropology, psychology and beyond. Each of the chapters proceeds by taking up a theme that is frequently articulated within what I term 'miscarriage stories' – 'I felt like a failure', for example, or 'I was stuck in limbo' – as a provocation to feminist philosophy. Accounts of personal experience are thereby treated not as transparent or self-evident empirical 'data' but rather as posing questions and problems to be critically examined (Scott 1991; Ahmed 2004; Oksala 2014).[41]

The miscarriage stories I draw upon are situated within the US and the UK, and include first-person accounts as well as reported experiences disclosed through qualitative interview-based research. I have made extensive use of collections such as *Interrogating Pregnancy Loss: Feminist Writings on Abortion, Miscarriage and Stillbirth* (Deveau and

Lind 2017) and *What God Is Honored Here? Writings on Miscarriage and Infant Loss by and for Native Women and Women of Color* (Gibney and Yang 2019). My research has also incorporated memoirs by literary writers, personal reflections in newspapers, magazines and blogs, and many conversations I have had in seminars, reading groups and writing groups while living in both the UK and the US over the past few years. It must be noted that sociological scholarship on the lived experiences of miscarriage in the US and the UK has to date been focused – like the 'pregnancy loss movement' itself – largely upon white cis–het middle-class non-disabled women (Van 2001; Cosgrove 2004). Studies that consider a wider range of experiences and perspectives, however, have been appearing more regularly (see e.g. Wojnar 2009; Peel and Cain 2012; Eichenbaum 2012; Kilshaw and Borg 2020); and in my research I have sought to 'recuperate the narrative gap' (Gibney and Yang 2019: 5) by including writings produced outside the academy as well as advocacy publications that feature qualitative interview material – like *Battling Over Birth: Black Women's Birthing Justice* (Chinyere Oparah et al. 2018) – to ensure a fuller range of perspectives and positions are considered.

Engaging with this broad range of miscarriage stories makes abundantly clear the extent to which socio-economic factors affect how miscarriage is differentially treated and experienced. The accounts of women of colour, for example, regularly document dismissive, and indeed openly hostile, treatment by health workers as a form of 'obstetric racism' (Davis 2019; Chinyere Oparah et al. 2018; Gibney and Yang 2019); and those of LGBTQ+ people consistently emphasize the heterosexism of health professionals and mainstream pregnancy discourses, which can amplify feelings of isolation (Luce 2010; Craven and Peel 2014). Personal stories also demonstrate that an individual's experience of miscarriage will depend upon their embeddedness within particular cultural, religious or spiritual interpretative frameworks, their unique reproductive history (which may include difficulties conceiving, or previous pregnancies, abortions, miscarriages and births), and the quality of their intimate relationships and social networks.[42]

In terms of wider context too, there are significant historical, socio-economic and political differences between the US and the UK to take into account, including their respective healthcare systems. For instance, though the UK's National Health Service is currently being subjected to a governmental campaign of chronic underfunding and privatization by stealth,[43] at present, medical treatment for miscarriage is free for the majority of people in the UK (the new NHS charging regime, introduced in 2015 as part of the 'hostile environment', renders some migrants 'chargeable' for pregnancy-related care, which may include treatment for miscarriage and stillbirth).[44] In comparison, one estimate from 2015 is that on average, uninsured women in the US pay between $4,000 and $9,000 for medical treatment of miscarriage, while insured women pay out-of-pocket expenses of between $250 and $1,200, depending upon their co-payments and deductibles (Grose 2015). Other key points of contextual difference include the centrality of abortion to US politics compared to the UK (where it remains, for now, a relatively marginal 'backbench' political issue), and the greater restrictions upon, and threat to, abortion rights and access in the US,[45] as well as the rising criminalization of miscarriage and stillbirth in states like Indiana and Oklahoma.[46]

At the same time, however, there are several experiential themes – like feelings of failure and guilt – that recur again and again throughout the wide-ranging material I have drawn upon, and which serve as the starting point for each of the book's chapters. It must be emphasized that such feelings are not experienced by everyone – miscarriage can generate an increased trust in one's body, for example, or a sense of emotional strength – and when they are, they are not felt or articulated in the same way. But they do resonate as tropes across miscarriage stories even as different individuals are immersed within different national contexts and social worlds, subjected to differing social pressures, and have differing levels and kinds of social and economic capital. As such, the book attempts the difficult balancing act of attending to affinities, connections and continuities across difference, injustice and inequality, hoping to illuminate points for solidarity along the way.[47]

In terms of the philosophical persuasion of *Pregnancy Without Birth*, it takes inspiration from those whose work can be described as 'critical phenomenology' such as Gail Weiss (1998, 1999), Rosalyn Diprose (2002), Sara Ahmed (2006) and Lisa Guenther (2013a, 2019). These feminist philosophers deploy generic phenomenological concepts such as 'intercorporeality' to foreground the transcendentally intersubjective conditions of subjective experience and the relationality of personhood, while also examining how contingent historical and social structures like heteronormativity, patriarchy and white supremacy shape our embodied subjectivities in constitutive 'quasi-transcendental' ways (Guenther 2019: 12; see also Salamon 2018).[48] As Guenther explains, this requires reaching beyond the confines of the classical phenomenological canon, drawing on a range of empirical and theoretical sources to understand and expose how these structures operate as 'ways of seeing' and 'ways of making the world' (2019: 12). In so doing, she proposes, critical phenomenology opens up space for 'new and liberatory possibilities for meaningful experience and existence', and can thus be understood as 'both a way of doing philosophy and a way of approaching political activism' (2019: 15).

This book seeks to participate in this critical phenomenological project by putting everyday taken-for-granted assumptions about 'normal' or 'natural' pregnancy up for critical scrutiny, while at the same time exploring and promoting alternative feminist understandings. To this end, as outlined above, I have adopted an eclectic transdisciplinary approach; but I have made one significant exclusion via the methodological decision not to engage in any detailed exegesis of omnipresent philosopher men such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and so on. This is partly because there is already a rich body of feminist work that enters into productive dialogue with these thinkers (see e.g. Weiss 1999; Diprose 2002; Guenther 2006; Bornemark and Smith 2016; Deutscher 2016; Lymer 2016); but also because I want to resist organizing feminist work around male authority figures, which can imply that feminists are simply 'interpreting' or 'extending' the work of men when they are often doing something quite different and original. The aim is thus to circumvent what Bonnie Mann refers to as philosophy's 'reverence problem' (2018: 42) and put the intellectual labour, ingenuity and creativity of women and gender nonconforming people front and centre.

Problematic terminology

One of the biggest challenges of this project has been language. First off, the terminology used to designate 'the foetus' takes us into highly vexed and unsettling territory, partly because of the high political stakes, and also because we are dealing with particularly liminal states of existence. In relation to specific pregnancies, moreover, the choice of term depends upon how a pregnancy is experienced and lived by the person who is pregnant and those close to them (Han 2018; Kilshaw 2020). For some, 'foetus' can seem too clinical or medical – 'did anyone ever paint the "fetus room" or knit sweaters for a "fetus"?' (Katz Rothman 1986: 107) – and the linguistic switch from 'baby' to 'foetus' that often occurs in medical settings during miscarriage (as discussed in Chapter 3), can be experienced as a serious form of social hypocrisy and betrayal. Yet to others, the language of 'baby' or 'child' performs an ontological over-projection that attributes too much too soon: for instance, when corporate pregnancy websites and even the NHS refer to 'your baby' when the blastocyst has barely implanted in the uterine wall. This book deploys 'foetus' as a minimal general term recognizing that foetuses can accrue further meanings as 'baby' or 'child', and that foetuses inhabit multiple layers of reality that cannot be easily captured by any one concept or figure of speech.[49]

Another complicated issue has been how to designate the involuntary 'spontaneous' ending of a pregnancy without a live birth. In the first instance, there is the uncertain boundary between 'miscarriage' and 'stillbirth'. The UK National Health Service defines 'miscarriage' as 'the loss of a pregnancy during the first 23 weeks', and a stillbirth as 'when a baby is born dead after 24 completed weeks of pregnancy';[50] but in the US, the point of distinction is more often twenty weeks. The terms themselves are also widely despised for being cold, insensitive and brimming with problematic implications. The word 'miscarriage', for instance, indicates that the proper outcome of a process has not materialized, as in a 'miscarriage of justice'. Indeed the 'mis' may seem to imply 'not only that something is wrong but you have an active role in making it so' (Garbes 2016); and 'carriage' arguably conjures up the image of the pregnant person as a 'carrier' or 'vessel' that feminists so vehemently reject. 'Pregnancy loss', therefore, is often used as an alternative within academia as well as pregnancy loss support communities – a wide-ranging term that can cover the cessation of a pregnancy however many weeks it lasted, as well as instances where a pregnancy has been voluntarily terminated but loss is felt.[51] However, as Erica Millar demonstrates (and as will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 5), the language of 'loss' is coming to overdetermine the representation of both miscarriage and abortion in politically problematic ways, because it implies that there is always loss when a pregnancy ends, even if the miscarrying/unpregnant person themselves does not see it that way (2016, 2018). The term ‘pregnancy loss’ also does not necessarily move us away from the idea of personal responsibility. As Alison Reiheld puts it, ‘A lost pregnancy must have been lost by someone … Such attempts to comfort are all too easily converted into a devastating subject-verb-object: “I lost the pregnancy” or “I lost the baby”’ (2015: 15).

There is no existing term, then, that is not problematic. In this book, the priority is to avoid universalizing experiential presumptions regarding what miscarriage means or how it feels to those who go through it, and so after much deliberation – and abandoned attempts at neologisms – I have opted to use the colloquial term ‘miscarriage’ as arguably the more experientially neutral term, while being acutely aware of its inadequacy. The focus is on what is generally understood to be ‘miscarriage’ rather than ‘stillbirth’; and there are important aspects of stillbirth that render it distinct and require dedicated analysis, such as it being rarer than miscarriage,[52] the publicly visible signs of pregnancy at the later stages (in most cases) that make it ‘common knowledge’, and the process of giving birth itself. But many of the arguments made in the book are germane to the involuntary cessation of pregnancy without a live birth at whatever stage; and though conflating miscarriage and stillbirth can feel very hurtful to some, research suggests feelings of loss are not necessarily influenced by the length of gestation despite temporal presumptions that ‘later means worse’ (Lovell 1983; Cosgrove 2004). I also want to flag here the linguistic challenge of referring to a person going through a miscarriage or stillbirth who is at once ‘pregnant and not pregnant’, or who has been pregnant but has not given birth and thus is not considered ‘postpartum’ (Silbergleid 2017). To refer to such states of being I use the terms ‘miscarrying’ or ‘unpregnant’ person, while again recognizing their potentially discomfiting nature.[53]

Finally, it must be noted that the designation of those who are/have been pregnant also raises issues, as speaking in generic terms of ‘pregnant women’ can be taken as exclusionary of pregnant men or those who are gender nonbinary or nonconforming. More inclusive gender-neutral terms like ‘pregnant people’ are increasingly being adopted, and impatience has been expressed in relation to feminists who persist in referring to ‘pregnant women’ as a generic collective, or ‘the pregnant woman’ as an abstract singular (see e.g. Lewis

2019: 24–5). Yet moving to gender-neutral language is by no means a simple fix. In the first instance, as Laura Briggs points out, the language of ‘pregnant people’ and ‘non-pregnant people’ has a history of reactionary usage: for instance, by those who seek to deny protections against pregnancy discrimination in the workplace by insisting it is not a form of illegal sex/gender discrimination (2017: 5). Moreover, the use of gender-neutral language can feel somewhat obfuscatory when pregnancy is hardly a gender-neutral affair. Just as the capacity for pregnancy has consistently been linked to femaleness and womanhood within the binary sex/gender model, normative and misogynist ideas about femaleness and womanhood – such as feminine self-sacrifice, the unruliness of female flesh or the untrustworthiness of women’s testimony and conduct – have in turn determined social expectations and the regulation of pregnancy. So while de-naturalizing the circular link between ‘pregnancy’ and ‘women’ is essential to the project of transforming dominant imaginaries of pregnancy and overturning the patriarchal, heteronormative, cisnormative government of reproduction, it does not necessarily make sense to speak of pregnancy in exclusively gender-neutral terms, or to abandon ‘pregnant women’ altogether as an analytical category. This is especially true when the intention is to examine how struggles for control of pregnancy and reproduction impact particularly upon people understood to be women and girls, though as Toze argues, ‘feminist critiques of the regulation of female bodies can be expanded to offer a mechanism for analysing the ways in which trans masculine bodies are also regulated’ (2018: 205).

With such considerations in mind, this book does use gendered terminology like ‘pregnant women’ when referring to gendered discourses and regimes of pregnancy that explicitly or implicitly evoke and impact upon pregnant women qua women. For instance, if I am evoking hegemonic representations of ‘the pregnant woman’ or the ‘mum-to-be’, I echo this gendered language to reflect a social and cultural reality. As Millar argues, the dominant modes of representing pregnancy, abortion and miscarriage ‘invariably assume “woman” as the subject’, and the claim that cultural representations of pregnancy are ‘gendered feminine’ does not equate to a claim that ‘only women experience pregnancy’ (2018: 27). When quoting, I also leave in authors’ original language. However, when the use of gender-specific terminology is not vital to the point being made, the book uses more capacious and inclusive terms like ‘pregnant people’ in a bid to expand the conceptual frame. To those who argue that this gesture ‘erases women’,[54] I would suggest embracing the strategic benefits of the emphasis on ‘people’. After all, as the feminist slogan goes, ‘women are people too!’

Book overview

Chapter 1 – Failure – interrogates the normative biological imaginaries that condition subjective experiences of miscarriage as the reproductive body ‘failing’ in its ‘most natural function’. It draws on feminist and critical disability/crip theory, as well as philosophy of biology, to explore how essentialist logics of ‘organic purposefulness’ and ‘womb teleology’ operate along gendered, racialized and ableist lines to construct ‘successful’ pregnancy as the ultimate marker of feminine identity and ‘use value’. It also examines how ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ have come to serve as value-laden ideals that destine us all for failure in some way or other. Contrary to the view that miscarriage must be ‘normalized’ and ‘naturalized’, therefore, this chapter argues instead for an eradication of ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ as measures for pregnancy of any kind.

Chapter 2 – Control – turns towards questions of subjective agency, offering a phenomenological response to commonly expressed feelings of being passive or powerless in the event of miscarriage, yet at the same time responsible and blameworthy. How can this apparent contradiction be navigated? At first glance, it appears we are stuck in an impossible double bind: if we insist that miscarriage simply ‘happens’ to the one who experiences it, this seems to confirm patriarchal views of pregnant people as ‘bodies-to-be-managed’ rather than active subjects of their own pregnancy; but when we claim ‘control of our own bodies’, this is easily co-opted by the neoliberal model of pregnancy as a ‘project’ determined by a pregnant individual’s lifestyle choices. To offer a way out of this pernicious binary, the chapter draws on feminist philosophies of ‘intercorporeality’ to promote a non-individualist concept of agency as a relational capacity for shaping and responding to a transformative bodily situation, which may or may not conform to one’s will. This enables us to recognize miscarrying/unpregnant people as fully agential subjects, I argue, while also dismantling pregnancy hierarchies that render ‘successful’ pregnancies a laudable individual achievement, and anything else a site of guilt, judgement and blame.

Chapter 3 – Ambiguity – extends the ‘intercorporeal’ understanding of pregnancy to explore the uncertainties and incongruities that often run through miscarriage stories when it comes to conceptualizing the status of the foetus and what exactly may have been lost. From the intercorporeal perspective, the material and conceptual complexities of miscarriage stem from the fundamentally ambiguous nature of pregnancy and are thus ineliminable. Yet the increasingly prevalent ‘proleptic’ model of pregnancy – which represents the foetus as an individuated ‘baby-person’ already – leaves us ill-equipped to deal with them. On the one hand, the proleptic model produces a hypocritical form of social betrayal in the event of miscarriage, whereby celebration of ‘the baby’ gives way to awkwardness, avoidance or silence. But it has also given rise to a compensatory and universalizing redescription of miscarriage as ‘baby loss’ which covers over the ambiguity of pregnancy and miscarriage and the multiple ways these phenomena are experienced – thus coinciding with anti-abortion logics and imaginaries. Accordingly, the chapter calls for a more critical and transformative approach to the politics of silence around miscarriage, which works to expose the hypocrisies of dominant pregnancy culture, while also building greater social tolerance of ambiguity as something to be affirmed rather than resolved or eliminated. Silence, then, appears not as a void but as a generative pause in the proleptic narrative, reimmersing us in the ambiguity that was there all along.

Chapter 4 – Suspension – considers the sense of a ‘lost future’, or being ‘stuck in limbo’, that is frequently described by those who undergo miscarriage. It begins by examining these temporal experiences in relation to the model of pregnant time as ‘liminal’: a transitional time between the past status of ‘not-mother’ and the future status of ‘mother’ following birth. Though this model does affirm the ambiguous nature of pregnancy (unlike the proleptic model), it nevertheless presents ambiguity as a temporary phase to be ultimately overcome. As such, it ends up depicting miscarriage in rather conventional terms as an incomplete rite of passage, and the miscarrying/unpregnant person as ‘left behind’ or ‘stuck’ in a liminality that was never supposed to be permanent. As an alternative, I draw in this chapter on feminist/queer theory to shatter the presumed opposition between pregnant time (as a forward time) and miscarriage time (as a stuck time) by rethinking *both* through the lens of 'suspended time'. By 'suspending the future to encounter the present', I seek to highlight some of the continuities between overlooked present-oriented temporalities of pregnancy and miscarriage, such as 'catching up to what is already happening' and 'growing sideways', arguing that if pregnant time is not represented in exclusively future-oriented terms as *being-towards-birth*, miscarriage need not be understood as wasted time, or as pregnancy's undoing.

Chapter 5 – Solidarity – turns finally to expressions of anger and resentment, as well as empathy and solidarity, within miscarriage stories, to explore how political solidarity could be further extended across 'miscarriage', 'pregnancy' and 'abortion' as sites of experience and struggle. To demonstrate the urgency of this political project, the chapter highlights the increasingly punitive treatment of miscarriage and stillbirth in the US, as hundreds of women – overwhelmingly poor and disproportionately of colour – have been arrested, prosecuted and incarcerated for allegedly causing their miscarriages/stillbirths through drug use, or for disguising illegal 'self-abortion' as miscarriage/stillbirth. Though it may seem that this rising criminalization of miscarriage necessitates a protective response that insists on its 'innocence', I argue instead for a feminist refusal of 'divide and rule' politics that would have us defend 'innocent' miscarriage at the expense of 'guilty' abortion or 'irresponsible' pregnancy. As an alternative approach, the chapter points to the rising 'full-spectrum' doula movement in the US – which offers non-judgemental support and care to all pregnant people whether their pregnancy ends in birth, abortion, miscarriage, stillbirth or adoption – as an inspiring practical example of feminist solidarity that paves the way for coordinated struggle at a broader level.

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