

Birth

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Natality and not mortality, may be the central category of political thought
(Hannah Arendt, 1958)

We are all born. Hannah Arendt suggests that the absence of this primary fact from histories of thought represents a significant lacuna in political and philosophical traditions. For Arendt natality, the capacity to begin, is the foundational fact of all thought, all politics and all action. Without some fundamental understanding of the place of birth, there can, she suggests, be no social change, no human future. Arendt's insistence on thinking birth as the basis for politics is radical in the context of a European tradition so overwhelmingly preoccupied with death, terror and mourning. Perhaps in Arendt's *natal thinking* lie the seeds of an alternative, future-orientated politics which might challenge the predominant neo-liberalism: An ideology that Lauren Berlant eloquently describes as 'the capitalist destruction of life in the project of making value' (2007: 282).

However, for Arendt natal politics bears no relation to childbirth and the reproductive sphere. The labours of women (social reproduction) are for Arendt hidden within the private realm of the household---whilst of course being absolutely foundational to and sustaining the public sphere. Birth, Arendt insists, is an experience 'beyond speech' which is 'antipolitical by definition' (1958: 63). Indeed for Arendt, the public sphere depends on the fact that 'man does not know where he comes from' (1958: 63). So despite the radical break from tradition suggested by Arendt's concept of natality, her insistence on separating the concept of birth, from the subjects who birth, places it within a masculinist tradition in which birth only ever appears as 'birth without women'. This is a tradition in which, as Luce Irigaray puts it, 'every utterance, every statement is ...developed and affirmed by covering over the fact that being's unseverable relation to the mother-matter has been buried' (1985: 162).

When birth is represented within European philosophical and literary traditions, it is the gift of men or male gods---`Zeus-given` (Arendt, 1958: 63). The history of philosophy and literature are littered with male births, metaphorical births in which birth is imagined as a masculine or divine act of creation (see Tyler, 2000). Michelangelo's famous Sistine chapel painting, *The Creation of Adam* in which the finger of God gives life, is one of the most vivid examples of male procreation. Birth has been systematically disembodied and appropriated by scientists, philosophers and artists. As the poet Anne Sexton expressed it:

I have put a padlock
on you, Mother, dear dead human (Sexton, 1972: 75)

The foundational matricide inherent within European thought is a well-rehearsed feminist argument (see Jacobs, 2009). Over a forty year period feminist scholarship from a variety of disciplines has traced, uncovered and critiqued masculinist appropriations of birth and the correlative abjection of maternal subjects from European histories of thought and representation (see Luce Irigaray 1985, Iris-Marion Young 1990, Adriana Cavavero 1998, Bracha Ettinger 2004).

And yet, women's 'troubling talent for making other bodies' remains at the heart of lived sexual inequalities (Donna Harraway 1991:253). To take one example, a recent British Government Report, 'Fairness and Freedom: The Final Report of the Equalities Review' states, 'Our new research reveals clearly that there is one factor that above all leads to women's inequality in the labour market – becoming mothers.' (2007: 66). Despite a raft of equal opportunities legislation since the 1970s, 7% of all pregnant women in Britain lose their jobs each year as a consequence of becoming pregnant and woman with children under 11 are the most discriminated group in the British workforce (ibid). Furthermore, the 'Fairness and Freedom' report reveals that maternal inequalities impact on all women of child-bearing age, because your likelihood of being employed at all is index-linked to your perceived capacity to give birth. Indeed, as Christine Battersby argues, all women, whether 'infertile, post-menopausal or childless', are assigned, 'a subject- position linked to a body that has perceived potentialities for birth.' (1998:16) It is important that feminists connect these everyday and ordinary discriminations to the abjection of maternal subjects explored in feminist theoretical work. Sacking women from their jobs because they have identified as 'maternal subjects', and abjecting them to the 'private sphere' of

domestic labour, illustrates in miniature the classic structure of 'the human condition' described by Arendt fifty years ago. The context seems dramatically differently, but if we probe beneath the surface we are returned to the same fundamental problematic—women are no longer confined to private spheres, but they are only able to enter the public sphere through processes of maternal abjection—painful processes of splitting and disavowal. Even when women accomplish this process and achieve some degree of 'equality' they will nevertheless be continually interpellated by their relation to the maternal. My claim here is that natality remains a pressing political question for feminism.

Too often feminist scholarship on birth and motherhood has remained atomized, each generation writing as though stumbling into motherhood for the first time. There has been a failure to find a way to resolve these questions inter-generationally--to recognize that the politics of birth is the politics of generation. In positioning birth, and those who birth, at the centre of politics, feminism needs to find ways to hold together diverse work in this field so it can be inherited. Until recently there have been few successful attempts to consolidate interdisciplinary research on birth and the maternal. The Canadian based *Association for Research on Mothering* (ARM), founded in 1998, was, until recently, the only international feminist organization in this area. However, the emergence of Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics, a network co-founded by Lisa Baraitser and Sigal Spigel in 2007, consisting of a diverse grouping of more than a hundred social scientists, humanities scholars, novelists, performance artists, film-makers, and psychotherapists, and the launch of a journal, Studies in the? Maternal (2009-), suggests that this field is finally having its own *re-naissance*.

This special issue emerged out of a workshop, Maternal Bodies (2005) and a conference Birth (2007), organised by Caroline Gatrell and myself at Lancaster University. The articles and shorter papers introduce a selection of current feminist work on the maternal and birth. Important and established scholars, such as the art theorist Rosemary Betterton and geographer Robyn Longhurst, appear alongside early career scholars and artists. All of the contributions in this issue are concerned, in different ways, with the representation of birth and questions of maternal agency. How can birth be thought and visualised differently? As the (problematic) cyclical structure of feminist work in this field might suggest, these questions have been explored in some depth in feminist theory and art practices from the 1970s onwards. However, I want to imagine that a shift is taking place.; a movement from an abject

asethetics towards the creation of a `life-full` natal asethetics which cannot be subsumed back within deathly abject paradigms (see Tyler, 2009).

This themed issue on birth emerges at an historical juncture when taboos on representing childbirth are being broken. If the 1970s marked the rise of what Berlant termed `foetal celebrity' (1997: 124) and the 1990s witnessed the breaking of a taboo on the visibility of the pregnant body, in the noughties we have witnessed the emergence of graphic representations of childbirth within the public sphere (see Tyler, 2001). Childbirth is now visible across a range of popular media: it has become televisual. In 2006 the reality television company Endemol brought British viewers Birth Night Live, two hours of live television broadcast from a hospital maternity unit. The Discovery Channel's Birth Day and Deliver Me! are two of several hugely popular television serials which follow (US) women through late pregnancy and into childbirth. These television shows emerged out of a grassroots trend to record childbirth on home movie cameras. As digital cameras have `democratised' movie making, the trend to film childbirth has grown. As Robyn Longhurst examines in this issue, the emergence of online video sharing platforms, such as Youtube, mean that thousands of graphic unedited childbirth films can now be viewed `at the press of a few computer keys'. In a fascinating study, Longhurst explores this phenomenon and its possible impact on the cultural imaginary.

In `the Placental Body in 4D: Everyday Practices of Non-Diagnostic Sonography`. Julie Palmer examines the impact and significance of another medium, non-diagnostic four-dimensional ultrasound, a commercial practice in which still ultrasound scan images are animated into cinematic style footage of foetal life in the womb—soundtracks added to these films are copied onto DVD's for expectant parent to take away. Drawing on rich observational data from private scan studios Palmer examines in detail how the placenta, the organ which is a point of connection and distinction between the pregnant woman and the foetus, and which `often gets in the way of the best shot', is constituted in scanning practices. Bringing the insights of feminist philosophical work on the placenta (see Maher 2002) to bear on everyday clinical practices enables Palmer to explore how maternal and foetal subjects are constituted in `real-time` through inter-subjective exchanges. Longhurst and Palmer's work raises a number of interesting questions. What will it feel like to be able to watch films of yourself before and during childbirth? If maternal origin is that which we must psychologically disavow, then is this new and often graphic visibility of birth suggestive of a significant historical and/or psycho-social shift? It's not simply that representations of birth have increased and changed, but the fact that

so many public kinds of representations of birth are now possible. In the context of a history in which birth was unrepresentable and unknowable, the possibility of visual cultures of birth is perhaps symptomatic of new forms of natal politics.

Alongside new popular and clinical visualisations of birth, some of the most interesting feminist work on birth resides on the axis between creative practice and critical thought. The work of the Manchester based art activist group birthrites is exemplary in this respect, with its concern with developing natal politics through aesthetic collaborations between artists, midwives, childbirth activists, obstetrician and other senior medical professionals (see <http://birthrites.org.uk/>). Other indicative work introduced in this issue is the art activism of groups such as the taking place collective, the affective photography of `urban explorers` whose work documents abandoned maternity wards (examined by Holly Prescott in this issue) and the political performance art of Lena Simic and Kerstin Bueschges. In a short essay titled `The Taboo Aesthetics of the Birth Scene` I engage with US painter Jessica Clements to explore the ways in which feminist art practice is challenging the taboo on the representation of birth. Clements's oil paintings of the physical act of birth, are, I suggest, indicative of an anti-*objet* birth aesthetic—a political aesthetic in which the birthing woman is resolutely the active subject not the *objet* of the birth-scene. In `Louise Bourgeois, Ageing, and Maternal Bodies` Rosemary Betterton argues that Bourgeois' `maternal aesthetics` offers resources for challenging the deep cultural taboo on `aged maternity`. At the age of 96, Bourgeois presented *Nature Study* (2007), depicting `carnal couples and pregnant and birthing figures embodied in brilliant pinks and scarlet reds ...represent[ing] women as ...powerful agents of the maternal`.

The rhetorical practice of `coming out` has long been central to counter-political theory. Lisa Baraitser's brilliantly evocative article, `Mothers who make things public` demonstrates the continued importance of autobiography for feminist theoretical work. Here Baraitser elaborates together two concerns, maternal ethics, and the idea of `making things public`. Throughout she draws upon anecdotes to explore what it means to think mothering as an ethics, as a public and as a political practice. The challenge, as Baraitser demonstrates, is to mobilize autobiographical interruptions in ways that will transform the very terms of the debate. In other words, women need to communicate what they already know in ways that will make a difference. One of the central problems is that not all maternal subjects can be heard.

The current noisy political and public debate which circulates around the maternal body is fraught and contradictory. Young working class mothers are still routinely demonised in political discourse and are staple television comic fodder; older mothers are censured and reviled for perverting 'nature'; working mothers are routinely castigated for failing their children; mothers who don't work outside the home are rebuked for failing themselves, their families and the economy. Meanwhile, the spectre of infertility has taken root within the imaginary life of white middle-class girls and women and the 25% of women who now chose not to have children are pitied and feared. The visual backdrop to these terrorising maternal figurations is an unending parade of images of beautiful, young, white, tight pregnant and post-partum celebrity bodies. Indeed, the commodification and sexual objectification of the maternal body, a subject matter deeply taboo as recently as the 1990s, is now routine to the point of banality. In short, the maternal has never been so very public, so hyper-visible, but the wall of commentary which surrounds the maternal and the images which represent it, are deeply incoherent. Within the cacaphony of maternal publicity, only certain kinds of maternal experience can be communicated and heard. The rise of confessional mommy columns in broadsheet newspapers, and the emergence of a 'Mom lit' fiction genre, is evident of the ways in which middle class women, with educational and economic capital, dominate mainstream literary and journalistic accounts of maternal experience.

Irene Gedalof's article, 'Birth, Belonging and Migrant Mothers: Narratives of Reproduction in Feminist Migration' highlights the ways in which maternal practices have been devalued in theoretical writing about migrant communities. Gedalof's article argues for a more interdisciplinary scholarship in which feminist philosophical writing on the maternal can be brought into dialogue with feminist migration studies to produce more fluid accounts of 'home' and 'belonging'. Lucy Hadfield's short essay, 'Conviviality and Maternity: Anticipating Childbirth and Negotiating Intergenerational Difference', explores similar questions of the complex coming together of inter-generation, mothering and migration in birth practices. Drawing on ethnographic data, Hadfield's account of Lyn, a British Chinese mother-to-be 'illustrates the intensity of the period of new motherhood in the lifecourse, as key beliefs and boundaries are re-negotiated'. In a different vein, performance artist Lena Simic's 'On *Medea/Mothers' Clothes*: A 'Foreigner' Re-figuring Medea and Motherhood' returns us once more to themes of motherhood, migrancy and 'home'. In this short reflective piece on her artistic practice, Simic juxtaposes Medea, the archetypal anti-mother, with her experiences and negotiations as a foreign mother in two working

class Liverpool toddler groups. This encounter ends with Simic 'coming out' as an artist and culminates in her staging a production of Medea for the Liverpool mothers. There is something profoundly liminal (and intensely disciplinary) about 'the toddler group'; Simic exposes some of the painful difficulties of negotiating this border space and in doing reveals something of what is at stake in thinking a feminist politics of natality.

Discrimination in the workplace, inadequate childcare provision, the erosion of maternal health care and reproductive rights, the deep structural relationship between poverty and maternity - these are just some of the pressing reasons for a focus on the politics of birth. Whilst feminism has to continue to concern itself with these inequalities, Arendt's work reminds us that we also need to think more systematically about birth. What might it mean if natality, and not mortality, was actually the central category of political thought? Of course Arendt is not the first thinker to focus on the question of 'life itself'. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze has become a central figure in what might be described as a new 'philosophy of life', a movement which has inspired contemporary thought with its emphasis on immanence, creativity and ethics. However, as Michel Foucault argued, the emergence of 'biological' thinking in the modern period made 'life' the central category of state governance (biopolitics). Today, a potent mixture of geneticisation, new imperialism and neoliberalism has instrumentalised 'life' further, making it the central node in global systems of capitalization, with the deepening inequalities which accompany globalism (Donna Haraway, 1997: 143 and see Franklin 2000). Arendt, writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, developed her concept of natality as a political, humanist response to the terror, horror, alienation and banality of contemporary life. Arendt's challenge to us, to rethink life from the perspective of birth, is undoubtedly as pressing as ever. While there is as yet no natalist counterpoint to 'death studies', this issue stakes a claim for birth as a vital site for contemporary feminist thought and practice.

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