

Analysing the abortion rights debate as a question of ‘body theory’

When differential representations and conceptualisations of pregnant embodiment conflict

Aideen O' Shaughnessy

ABSTRACT

Reproductive freedom or the ‘right to choose’ was one of the linchpins of second-wave feminism in Europe and in the USA, in the second half of the twentieth century. However, more than forty years after the passing of *Roe v. Wade*¹, abortion remains illegal in a number of European countries, while rollbacks on reproductive rights are threatened by the new political administration in the United States. The abortion issue has long been posited as a feminist struggle against male ownership of women’s² bodies and against sexual and religious conservatism. In this article, I take an alternative viewpoint, analysing the abortion debate as a question of body theory. Using empirical data from the Irish abortion rights debate, I analyse how the Pro-Life and Pro-Choice movements in Ireland construct and represent pregnant embodiment in differential ways, asking whether these diverse conceptualisations variously underpin (anti-) abortion ideologies. I argue that engaging with the abortion rights debate within the framework of body theory provides useful analytical tools for deconstructing current discourse, whilst also making space for the articulation of new perspectives from the point of view of the embodied pregnant subject.

KEYWORDS

Body theory, abortion rights debate, pregnant embodiment, ideology

INTRODUCTION

With second-wave feminist activists securing at least partial reproductive rights in the majority of Western nation-states in the 1970s and 1980s, the contemporary significance of the reproductive body for feminist scholarship is somewhat debated. Recent developments in Ireland, Poland and the United States of America, where tens of thousands of women have taken to the streets to demand basic rights, including unfettered access to full reproductive health care services, demonstrate that the reproductive body has once again become an imperative, and as I argue, an obligatory site for feminist intervention.

There is much scholarship on the issue of reproductive rights, but thus far this literature speaks largely to the relationship between reproductive bodies and collective identity politics; the

¹ The 1973 US Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Roe v Wade* judged that a woman’s right to privacy entails the right to make her own medical decisions including the decision to have an abortion. *Planned Parenthood*, accessed 29th March 2017, <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/roe-v-wade>.

² While the terms ‘woman’/‘women’s bodies’ are used variously throughout this article in reference to abortion rights debates, I understand that pregnant bodies are not always women’s bodies - studies into representations of pregnant embodiment must be attentive not to reify this assumption. Abortion access is an issue for cis, trans and nonbinary individuals alike.

(pregnant) female body often conceptualised as an allegory of the nation, becoming a highly contested terrain onto which states and governments project anxieties about social change and political transition (Martin 2002, Smyth 1998, Quinan 2014). Scholarly analyses on the issue of abortion rights have given less scope, however, to embodiment theory and its implication as underwriting ideology regarding bodily autonomy and choice in pregnancy, in particular and predetermined ways. Positing the abortion rights debate as an issue of 'body theory' forces us to go back a step, refocusing our attention away from identity politics, and pressing us instead to ask whether the ways in which we *construct*, *conceptualise* and *represent* pregnant bodies in their *material* form, necessarily and differentially influences opinion regarding the pregnant subject's right to individually own and manage their pregnancy.

In this article, I propose a thought experiment, which is to engage with the reproductive rights debate not as an issue of religious conservatism or nationalist politics, but rather as a point of ideological incongruity where mismatching theorisations of pregnant embodiment come into conflict. The theoretical framework within which this research operates is embedded strongly in sexual difference feminist theory and feminist readings of classical existential phenomenology of the body, thereby constituting a transdisciplinary approach. Sexual difference feminists were among the first to dislodge universal theories of the subject by delineating a causal linkage between one's specific sex/gendered positioning, the sensorial logics used and resulting theorisations on subjectivity and embodiment.

This research draws on the foundational work of philosopher Iris Marion Young in 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation' and that of political scientist Rosalind Pollack Petchesky on 'Fetal Images...' (Young 1984, Petchesky 1987). This canon, although dating from the 1980s, is in my opinion still relevant to the contemporary context. I will illustrate this point by combining these theoretical frameworks and demonstrating their applicability via a visual analysis of the media used by the Pro-Life and Pro-Choice factions in the current abortion rights debate in Ireland. This approach is experimental its combination of theoretical and empirical data, and in its delineation of how classic philosophical conceptualisations of the (pregnant) body are differentially operationalised or revised, in the contemporary social context, via the abortion rights debate.

The structure of this article will work as followed: firstly, I outline the current global climate in relation to reproductive rights. Secondly, I describe the key tenets of existential phenomenology of the body with particular scope given to how feminist theorists such as Young have revised dominant philosophical theory on (pregnant) embodiment. I then turn to Petchesky to demonstrate how fetal-imaging technology has perpetuated particular conceptualisations of the pregnant body which have been co-opted by the Pro-Life faction worldwide (Petchesky 1987). Combining these

theoretical frameworks in an analysis of Pro-Life and Pro-Choice campaign media in Ireland, I demonstrate that discordant conceptualisations of pregnant embodiment are indeed at play – Pro-Life campaign media seemingly appropriating a model of pregnant embodiment stemming from masculinist philosophical theory where the woman is necessarily objectified by her pregnancy; Pro-Choice campaign media depicting an alternate representation of pregnant embodiment, with the maternal subject assuming an active subject relation to the world (Young 1984). Finally, I urge feminist scholars to engage further with body theory, demonstrating how this framework furnishes us with methodological tools for articulating new theories of pregnant embodiment, from the point of view of the maternal subject.

CONTEMPORARY POLITICS AND REPRODUCTION

Social theorist Imogen Tyler maintains that feminist scholarship has thus far failed to resolve questions around natality; women are “no longer confined to private spheres” she says, but still they are only granted access to the public sphere by splitting themselves into woman/mother or by disavowing their maternal subjectivity completely (Tyler 2009, 3). This insistence on natality as a “pressing political question for feminism” seems more than justified when we analyse the contemporary global context in relation to reproductive rights (ibid.).

On September 24th 2016, over 20,000 women and pro-choice activists lined the street outside Government Buildings in Dublin to demand a repeal of the 8th amendment of the Irish constitution (*Thousands take part in pro-choice rally* 2016). The 8th amendment gives equal right to life to the mother and the unborn, thereby criminalising termination of pregnancy in the majority of circumstances (ibid.). Studies estimate that approximately 9 women per day travel from Ireland to the UK to access abortion services there – with more travelling to the Netherlands and elsewhere (*Number of women* 2016). In October of this year, the Polish government attempted to impose a total ban on abortion; the proposed bill was thrown out after Polish women collectively removed themselves from their workplaces and took to the streets to protest the confiscation of their reproductive rights (*Black Monday* 2016). In the USA, one of President Trump’s first executive orders has prohibited international organisations which receive federal funding from performing or promoting abortion services (*Trump’s order on abortion*, 2017). The continued politicisation and policing of the female reproductive body clearly mandates feminist intervention in terms of scholarship and activism.

As stated above, much previous research on the topic has already delineated a relationship between anxieties about collective or national identity and the tightening or loosening of sexual freedoms for women and pregnant people (Martin 2002, Smyth 1998, Butler 2008). In this article, I seek to position the reproductive rights debate as a point of incongruence where multiple,

opposing theories of embodiment meet on the site of the reproductive feminine body. The sexual difference feminism canon delineates a causal linkage between one's material embodied positioning, sensorial hierarchies and resulting theories of subjectivity, that is, it deconstructs the legitimacy of a universal theory of the subject, teaching instead that the way we think about bodies is contingent on our material, embodied, location and the tools of conceptualisation employed. Thus, perhaps it is possible to view the abortion rights debate as a point of conflict where previously accepted understandings of pregnant bodies as passive environments for fetal development come into conflict with alternative models of maternal embodiment which favour the pregnant being as an active and autonomous subject.

PREGNANT EMBODIMENT – LOCATING THE MATERNAL SUBJECT

Sexual difference feminism posits that the feminine subject has a unique experience of her material body which remains unacknowledged and unrepresented within predominantly masculinist discourse. This leads necessarily to an inability to fully conceptualise feminine subjectivity and embodiment, which thus creates her exclusion from the patriarchal public sphere. Delineating an arguably similar hypothesis, philosopher Iris Marion Young argues that the pregnant female subject too has a unique experience of her maternal embodiment which is as of yet unacknowledged. Discourse on pregnancy, she argues, “omits subjectivity”, instead conceptualising pregnancy as “a state of the developing fetus, for which the woman is container; or it is an objective, observable process coming under scientific scrutiny; or it becomes objectified by the woman herself, as a ‘condition’ in which she must take care of herself” (Young 1984, 45).

Young identifies two arenas within which pregnant embodiment has been articulated and represented within strictly masculinist terms, thereby leading to a conceptualisation of the pregnant body which dangerously misaligns with that of the maternal subject: existential phenomenology and medical science. Drawing on works by Erwin Straus and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Young argues that non-dualist philosophies are incompatible with the experience of pregnant subjectivity and embodiment in two ways. Firstly, these philosophers situate consciousness and subjectivity within the body itself, that is, they offset dualistic metaphysics which assume a radical mind/body split. This emphasis on a “unified subject” as the condition for existence is, for Young, incompatible with the bodily experience of the pregnant subject in which the unity of the self dissolves (Young 1984, 48). Young invokes the words of Julia Kristeva, who described the pregnant experience as a “redoubling up of the body”, with the “separation and coexistence of self and other, of nature and consciousness” (Kristeva 1981, 31 quoted in Young 1984). Young agrees with this notion of a (pregnant) “body subjectivity” that is both “split” and “decentred” (Young 1984, 48).

Secondly, existentialist philosophers adopt a “distinction between transcendence and immanence as two modes of bodily being”: again, this is for Young discordant with the embodied experience of pregnancy (Young 1984, 50). Straus and Merleau-Ponty argue that one can experience one’s self as either subject or object, but never as both at the same time. We can be aware of our body “for its own sake”, how it is perceived by others, thus becoming *objectified* by its material weight; or we can adopt an active relation to the world, engaging in our aims and projects, and thus inhabiting our body as a *subject* (ibid., 50). For Young, this description is incompatible with the experience of the pregnant subject, arguing; “Pregnant consciousness is animated by a double intentionality – my subjectivity splits between awareness of myself as body and awareness of my aims and projects” (Young 1984, 51). Pregnancy “roots me to the earth” she says, “not as an object but as the maternal weight I am in movement” (ibid., 52). For external observers, Young says, the woman is always already objectivised by her pregnancy – this is obvious from the narrative of “uneventful waiting”, a woman is “expecting” a child; for the pregnant subject however, pregnancy is not just a time of waiting, it is a time where she is making, doing and living her gestation in a myriad of agentic ways (Young 1984, 53).

The second arena in which dominant theorising on pregnant embodiment has created discordant conceptualisations of pregnant subjectivity is within contemporary medical science. The pregnant subject’s encounter with obstetrical medicine, according to Young, alienates her from her pregnant and birthing experience. Young characterises this “alienation” as “appropriation by one subject of another subject’s *body, action, or product of action*, such that he or she does not recognise that objectification as having its origins in his or her experience” (Young 1984, 55, emphasis added). For Young, obstetric medicine objectifies and alienates the pregnant subject through the use of medical instruments which objectify the gestational processes such that her unique knowledge and experience of her body is rendered superfluous and control of these proceedings are removed from her power. Finally, Young argues that medical science, basing itself on the masculine bodily experience, assumes a type of fixity i.e. that the healthy body is unchanging. As such, pregnant embodiment – which is by nature changeable – is characterised as a type of illness, for which the pregnant woman must be treated.

Young’s research is central to the thought experiment I undertake in this article— by which I attempt to situate the abortion rights debate as an issue of body theory—precisely because she is among the first feminist philosophers to give special attention to an analysis of pregnant embodiment and subjectivity. Young’s work is doubly successful because she both destabilises the universal applicability of dominant theorising on pregnant embodiment—deconstructing the specific philosophical assumptions and methods of enquiry on which this theorising has been premised—and secondly, because she highlights the material mechanisms by which these logics

are operationalised in obstetric science and technology. Young's research is imperative to my argumentation, not necessarily in terms of the specificities of the alternative theory she proposes, but because she illuminates the *possibility* of articulating *multiple conflicting theorisations* of pregnant embodiment from different and particularly embedded perspectives.

IRELAND'S ABORTION RIGHTS DEBATE: ANALYSING REPRESENTATIONS OF PREGNANT EMBODIMENT

In 'Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction' (1987), Rosalind Pollack Petchesky argues that the act of treating the fetus as though it were exterior to the woman's body and viable without her, is a political one. Petchesky maintains that, within our "visually-oriented culture", the use of obstetric instruments, particularly fetal imaging technology, is imperative to "the strategy of antiabortionists to make fetal personhood a self-fulfilling prophecy by making the fetus a public presence" (Petchesky 1987, 264). The images³ below, gleaned from the Facebook page of the 'Pro-Life Campaign Ireland' clearly demonstrate Petchesky's idea of "fetal personhood", (i.e. the fetus represented as entirely separate to the pregnant body). What is particularly interesting in terms of representations of pregnant embodiment⁴ is that, not only does the pregnant female form become indiscernible in these images, but the pregnant body is somehow implied as an unsafe environment for the fetus. The images are combined with the phrases 'Fewer women would have abortions if wombs had windows' and 'Gender equality starts here', visually signifying the pregnant body as a vessel for fetal development, but furthermore inferring that the pregnant person, if given free reign over their reproductive body, is a potential adversary or threat to this autonomous development.

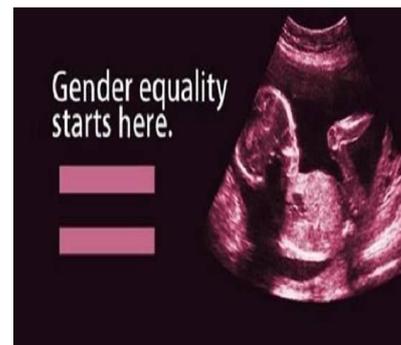
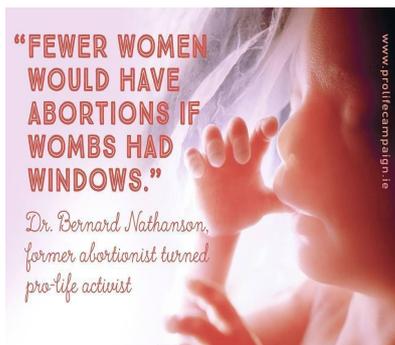


ILLUSTRATION 1 (LEFT) 2 AND ILLUSTRATION 2 (RIGHT): PRO CHOICE CAMPAIGN IRELAND (2017)

³ The images analysed herein were selected via a purposive sampling method, meaning selection on the basis of their relevance to the research question. The chosen images feature (aspects of) pregnant bodies – including external and internal bodily perspectives - and thus, I believe, offer insight into the conceptualisation and representation of pregnant embodiment by Pro-Life and Pro-Choice identified groups. A larger sample size would increase generalisability.

⁴ I examined the photographs according to conventional content analysis methods, delineating particular codes and categories to deliver new insights.

Whilst many of the images utilised by the Pro-Life Campaign focus entirely on the fetus inside the womb, others do provide an external focus on the pregnant body.⁵ Interestingly however, these images which do include pregnant people seem often to depict them as peripheral, positioning them at the edge of the frame, or passive, with their heads often bent low or to the side, eyes averted or entirely absent from the scene. In the images below, one pregnant woman stands to the side of the shot, head lowered and eyes towards the ground, the camera focused entirely on the trunk of her body and the light which seems to radiate around it, with no discernible emphasis on her facial features. In the other image, the camera focuses again on the trunk of the body with the pregnant woman's head almost removed from the frame.⁶

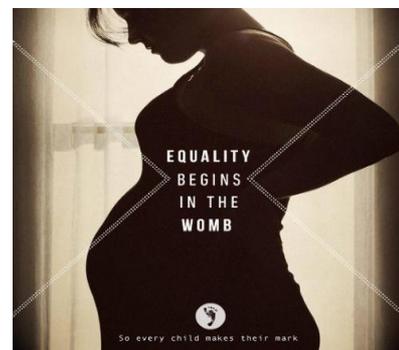


ILLUSTRATION 3 (LEFT) AND ILLUSTRATION 4 (RIGHT): PRO CHOICE CAMPAIGN IRELAND (2017)

Interestingly, the Pro-Choice Campaign Ireland's Facebook page does not include images of (discernibly) pregnant bodies or images of mothers and babies, instead showcasing photographs of people at protests, rallies and demonstrations primarily.⁷ This was also the case for the Facebook page of the Coalition to Repeal the 8th Amendment⁸ – which is an umbrella organisation for Pro-choice groups in Ireland. One smaller community project advocating alongside the Pro-Choice Campaign Ireland for a repeal of the 8th amendment is the 'Repeal Project'. Originating as a pop-up shop selling sweaters emblazoned with the word 'Repeal', it has now become a wider offshoot of the Irish Pro-Choice campaign. Again, like the Facebook pages of the Pro-Choice Campaign Ireland, and the Coalition to Repeal the 8th Amendment, the Repeal Project Instagram profile does not showcase many images of pregnant women or mothers and babies, displaying instead numerous 'headshots' of various activists and allies donning the 'Repeal' sweater.

⁵ Fig.1, Fig.2, Fig.3, and Fig.4, "Pro-Life Campaign Ireland", *Facebook*, accessed October 24th, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/prolifecampaignireland/>.

⁶ It is important to note that the "Pro-Life Campaign Ireland", Facebook page includes a range of diverse images, however those depicting pregnant bodies in what could be deemed an active stance i.e. centred in the frame and facing the camera, or which focused on the entirety of the body (including the face) were few and where they occurred, appeared to be 'home-made' images sent in by followers of the page, rather than official campaign photos.

⁷ "Pro-Choice Campaign Ireland", *Facebook*, accessed February 5th 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Pro-Choice-Campaign-Ireland-10150138118315254/?fref=ts>.

⁸ "Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment", *Facebook*, accessed February 5th 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/repeal8/?fref=ts>.

Two images shown below from the Repeal Project Instagram page do however depict a pregnant woman and a woman and child. In the first image, the pregnant woman stands in the centre of the frame, facing the camera, her hands on her stomach perhaps indicating protection or possession.⁹ The parameters of the shot, showcasing the entirety of the head, upper body and trunk together, contrast strongly with the images on the Pro-Life Campaign Facebook page which tend often to divide and dissimulate the upper sections of the body. In the second image, the woman is again centred in the picture, the camera focusing on her face and eyes in particular, while she holds the child close to her body. The emphasis on the face and eyes in both images seemingly forces the viewer to connect with the pregnant woman/mother as a thinking, feeling subject, rather than as a peripheral 'object'. The second image, although not depicting a (discernibly) pregnant body is still useful in my opinion, in terms of symbolising how those involved in the 'Repeal Project' appear to view and relate to reproductive/maternal subjects and bodies as autonomous and agentic.



ILLUSTRATION 5 (LEFT) AND ILLUSTRATION 6 (RIGHT) - IMAGES OF THE REPEAL PROJECT (2017)

The lack of images of pregnant bodies on the Pro-Choice Campaign Ireland's Facebook page is interesting in itself¹⁰—perhaps indicating a desire on the part of some Pro-Choice campaigners to disassociate images of late-term pregnancies from abortion rights discussions, given that very few terminations take place at this late stage.¹¹ This assertion can only be proved or disproved however by engaging in further dialogue with Pro-Choice individuals, perhaps in the form of in-depth interviews. Furthermore, while the analysis furnished above is an important first step in delineating the differential representations of pregnant bodies located in the Irish abortion rights debate, further participatory research is needed to articulate how Pro-Life and Pro-Choice individuals variously conceptualise and understand pregnant embodiment, and to ascertain to what extent these conceptualisations and representations influence opinion and ideology regarding a woman's right to choose.

⁹ Fig.5 and Fig. 6, "Repeal Project", *Instagram*, accessed February 5th 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/repealproject/?hl=en>.

¹⁰ The decision to analyse social media platforms was informed by the substantive social media presence occupied by the abortion debate in Ireland. I chose the Pro-Life Campaign Ireland's page as it is a non-profit organisation advocating for Pro-Life education in Ireland with a large online following. In relation to the Pro-Choice side, I examined the Facebook pages of the Pro-Choice Campaign Ireland, another non-profit group with a significant online following, and the Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment. Because of the lack of images of pregnant bodies found there, I also included in my analysis the Instagram profile of Repeal Project.

¹¹ *Department of Health*, "Abortion Statistics England and Wales: 2015", accessed 7th July 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/570040/Updated_Abortion_Statistics_2015.pdf.

CONCLUSION

Sexual difference feminism tells us that the way in which we theorise subjectivity and embodiment is contingent on our own sexed/gendered positioning, particular sensorial hierarchies and the methods of enquiry involved—the lack of a female subject position is explained by the inability of masculinist theorists to conceptualise fully the embodied feminine experience (Irigaray 1985). Similarly, for Iris Marion Young, there is a fundamental incompatibility between dominant theorising on pregnant embodiment and the embodied maternal experience. Perhaps then, this is because dominant theorising on pregnant embodiment has also been premised on masculinist and scopopic perspectives, excluding the maternal subjects lived experience? (Young 1984, Irigaray 1985). According to Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, the implication of a sensory hierarchy really becomes potent in the pregnant subjects encounter with obstetric medicine, particularly fetal imaging technology which objectifies and personifies their pregnancy. This treatment of the fetus as a subject or patient which is separate to and autonomous from the woman's body is a political act, according to Petchesky, which has problematic implications for the integrity and autonomy of the feminine birthing subject in controlling, observing and narrating her own gestation (Petchesky 1987).

By reifying this link between theories of embodiment, sensorial logics and subject position(s), Young manages to successfully destabilise existentialist phenomenology's universalising theory of pregnant embodiment, delineating that alternative conceptualisations are discernible from the point of view of the embodied maternal subject. Following Young's framework, perhaps we can position the abortion rights debate as an issue of 'body theory', where incongruent conceptualisations of pregnant embodiment conflict. The relation between abortion and embodiment has also been taken up by MacKenzie (1992) to both debunk the 'fetal personhood' argument of anti-abortionists and to problematise feminist discourses around 'bodily autonomy'; like Young, MacKenzie advocates further phenomenological inquiry from the point of view of the pregnant subject (MacKenzie 1992).

The visual analysis provided above is limited in scope, but is valuable I believe in showcasing that discordant representations of pregnant embodiment are at play in the Irish abortion rights discussion. Images gleaned from the 'Pro Life Campaign Ireland' Facebook page seem to depict the pregnant body as a passive environment for fetal development, as peripheral to the child/birth scene, and as divisible and superfluous in parts. Those images gleaned from the 'Repeal Project' Instagram provide a stark contrast to this; the pregnant woman/mother both taking a central position in the scene, with a strong focus on her bodily entirety including her face—perhaps forcing the viewer to engage with the woman as an agentic, autonomous embodied subject, who is not always necessarily and uniquely objectivised by her pregnancy.

The current geo-political context in relation to reproductive rights demonstrates that the maternal body has once again become an imperative sight for feminist intervention in terms of scholarship and activism. In this article, I have argued that the abortion rights debate, whilst always already invoking questions about sexual freedom and national identity, could equally be postulated as an issue for body theory. In delineating the theoretical linkage between sensorial logics, embodied positioning and theorising on subjectivity, feminist philosophy on the body can shed light on how conflicting representations of pregnant embodiment are constructed and how these conceptualisations become operationalised by various factions in the abortion rights debate.

Engaging with the abortion rights debate within a framework of body philosophy is doubly useful in my opinion, because it furnishes us with mechanisms for constructing counter-narratives, articulated from the point of view of pregnant and not-yet-pregnant, feminine subjects. “Discourse on pregnancy omits subjectivity”, according to Iris Marion Young, but perhaps this is because dominant discourse on pregnancy is not often articulated from the point of view of the pregnant subject (Young 1984, 45)? It is beyond the scope of this essay to continue Young’s work articulating new theories of pregnant embodiment, however I believe that this work can and must be carried out. By refocusing attention on the pregnant or not-yet-pregnant subject, how she lives, makes and does her reproductive body in material and immaterial ways, perhaps it is possible to resituate pregnancy as actively embodied, as an agentic labour over which the pregnant subject can and should hold autonomy and integrity?

To conclude, I believe that body theory can aid us in our intervention to the abortion rights debate not only theoretically and methodologically, but also ethically – in recognising and refocusing the “enfleshed, immanent subject-in-becoming”, at the centre of the abortion discussion, for whom life is “embodied, embedded and eroticised” (Braidotti 2011, 114).

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