

Alien Materiality: On the Anonymity of Childbirth

Introduction

In the hallways of fluorescent lit hospitals across the world, special rooms have been constructed to house women in labour. In those rooms, the fluorescent light has been replaced with a soft glow, which is emitted against the backdrop of ambient music and tokens of familiarity. Special devices are attached to the wall to enable the labouring woman to best assume a position germane to birth. From time to time, a doctor will verify the course of labour is proceeding as planned. Otherwise, the task is left to a series of midwives, who each day contends with the routine procedure of extracting one body from another body.

But in the midst of this organised civility, something strange is happening that exists beyond the jurisdiction of modern medicine. A labouring woman enters the hospital. In turn, she will give birth, either naturally or through the intervention of surgery. She will leave and her body will undergo a series of modifications, not only empirically but also conceptually. In the midst of this the body has become the site of a metamorphosis, revealing itself as a unity of materiality that is both inextricably familiar and irreducibly unfamiliar at the same time. Such an atmosphere is one that is often taken up not only in the theoretical literature on childbirth—to give the illustration of here of de Beauvoir—but also in aesthetic expressions not least in the horror genre where the trope of birth is often deployed to voice concerns about bodily ownership, self-integrity, and a suspicion of medical practitioners as being motivated by sinister intentions. *Alien*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Embryo*, *The Brood*, *Inseminoid*, *Baby Blood*—each of these films deals with the notion of the labouring body as the site of an irreducible strangeness that cannot be integrated into everyday life despite taking place within the context of such a life. A remnant remains, an excess that is both the kernel of horror and fascination.

Beyond the familiar tropes of birth as a horrifying event, part of its strange aspect seems to centre on the theme of *anonymity*. One way the theme of anonymity comes to the surface is in terms of the a-subjectivity of the foetus. The foetus that lives inside of the mother does so beyond and outside of the framework of subjective discourse; there is no communication save for that of two bodies touching and being touched by one another. The foetus moves inside the womb, its prodding and kicking at times even visible on the surface of the body and may also occur at particular times of the day. Two bodies interact and intertwine, but the relationship is asymmetrical and without reciprocity. There is an anonymous a-subjective being that hears and can taste, who can smell and sense motion, but nevertheless does not distinguish between discernible aspects of experience, living in a perpetual present, withdrawn from subjectivity, and thus marking a limit for phenomenological inquiry.

Yet there is another way to think of the relation between anonymity and birth, and that is in terms of the uncanny terrain between the body as one's own and the body as other. To speak of the body in its otherness invokes the idea of the pregnant body as being the host of another body. What I have in mind, however, is not simply the pregnant body as the host of another life, less even the pregnant body as a perceptually foregrounded object of pain; more enigmatic than this, I am thinking here of the body-in-labour as a body that brings to light the inheritance of an anonymous and immemorial temporality outside of lived experience. On this point, Merleau-Ponty writes notably that “[h]er own pregnancy is not an act like all the others she accomplishes with her body. Pregnancy is more an anonymous process which happens through her and of which she is only the seat” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 78). Such an anonymous process, as I will develop it in this talk, raises questions about bodily

ownership, the integrity of selfhood, and, within the context of birth itself, an accompanying anxiety over the sense of agency surrounding the birth process.

The Concept of Anonymity in Merleau-Ponty

My plan is to think through the issue of birth and anonymity through the lens of Merleau-Ponty. The concept of anonymity in his thought involves several strands; and like his thought as a whole, the concept is worked and reworked on, refined and radicalized as his thought progresses toward its endpoint. More than this, the theme of anonymity comes under different terms: as prepersonal or impersonal, “an original past,” natural time, a time without a subject, an “absolute past of nature, “primordial silence,” “prehistory,” “a past which has never been present,” and, in his later work, “the Memory of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 252, 137/160, 184/214, 240/277, 252; 1968, 194). These themes run throughout his work, forming a thread of continuity that provides a basic pivot, around which his thought gravitates, such that by the end we have several expressions of anonymity, each interdependently tied up with the other.

The genesis of Merleau-Ponty’s account of anonymity is motivated by a desire to account for the structure of perception, where perception is governed by a field of meaning and sense, unifying temporality into an overarching arc of significance. The point of departure is a question that runs throughout his work; namely, *who is it that perceives?* We generally respond to this question in a self-affirmative way. It is *I* who perceives things in the world, *I* who moves through the world. But who—or what—is this “*I*” that provides a restorative function in the world? Who is it that enables me to function in the world, to institute meaning, and integrate a bodily mass of organs into a synthesis capable of walking from one corner of the room to another, or, in the case of the female body, of giving birth to another life?

Responding to this question, Merleau-Ponty develops the idea of a body behind the body, a prehistory, impersonal, and foreign body that traces out a pathway in order for me to step forward in the world in the first instance. It is not that perceive, insofar as “*I*” reducible to a set of persona values, desires, and memories; but that an anonymous one perceives in and through me, and which “*I*” re-enact. In a critical passage, he writes that “A margin of *almost* impersonal existence thus appears around our personal existence, which, so to speak, is taken for granted, and to which I entrust the care of keeping me alive … my organism—as a pre-personal adhesion to the form of the world, as an anonymous and general existence—plays the role of an *innate complex* beneath the level of my personal life” (86). As an “*almost* impersonal existence,” my body is never entirely anonymous but nor is it unquestionably singular; rather, it is a strange hybrid of rhythms, habits, and processes that are conceived in the midst of finite life and which simultaneously belong to an older order of Nature. “Personal existence,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “is intermittent” (86), and behind the surface of being a discrete self who is identifiable with “one’s own” body, there exists another kind of existence, elemental and indifferent to the self that assumes a relationship to it.

Stranger Things

Merleau-Ponty presents us with an account of the body’s materiality as being inextricably and irreducibly *alien*. To describe the human body as alien means recognising that its infrastructure belongs to an elemental time, to a time of the world prior to the advent of the *I*, and indeed forgotten by the *I*. Against this, human existence emerges as a particular configuration of an impersonal nature. As such, the inception of the subject is not only a temporal event insofar as living

beings are born and die; more than this, we are of time and are time incarnated in the flesh. Time runs in a series of complex ways; those that are habitual and which belong to us, and those that derive from a sedimented prehistory that runs parallel to us without ever being identifiable with us. Merleau-Ponty speaks of this temporality as a “past that has never been present,” as a prehistory that is resistant to personalised perception, and instead forms an undercurrent that haunts waking life from the outset (Merleau-Ponty 2012). Seen in this way, we do not coincide with our own origin; rather, we are merely the resumption and trace of what Merleau-Ponty will call a “thought older than I am [which is] at work in my perceptual organs and of which these organs are merely the trace” (367).

To describe the body as alien means again recognising that our origin lies outside of ourselves and thus the centre of subjectivity is not the personalised sphere of perception but an anonymous and alien subjectivity, which can never be integrated into my own experience. As such, I am neither a pure presence nor a pure transparency; there are other layers working in and through me that creates of a series of abysses in my perceptual life. There is,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it” (296). This self-alienation from both the structure of the body together with its sensing apparatus means that I am never the “author” of sensation, but instead the means through which “general existence” is “destined to a physical world” (224).

Finally, to describe the body as alien begs the question of how a living human subject can experience their own body as alien without rendering it a site of familiarity? The question appears paradoxical because to already have such an experience is to personalize it, to some extent. The paradox is dissolved so long as we remain heedful of Merleau-Ponty’s observation that an “*almost* impersonal existence” surrounds our personal existence. We are never entirely dissolved into anonymity nor are our lives uninterrupted seasons of bliss. It is true: for the most part, such reflections on anonymous life are absent in lived experience; carnal life is given to experience in and through the lens of a personal sphere, which provides an atmosphere of familiarity and constancy not only to the body but to the surrounding world more generally. For the most part, we remain at home with ourselves and in the world. But in the home there is also disquiet, and as Merleau-Ponty indicates, personal existence is intermittent. Absence, displacement, and hauntings occur even—*especially*—in the most innocuous setting. Thus, if affective states such as horror and anxiety reveal the limits of the body as one’s own, then do so because they involve a constellation of contradictory aspects inhabiting the same space: the body is both foreign and intimate, the world is as familiar as it is alien, and the sense of self is both integrated and fragmented in the same measure. The experience of anonymity is thus an experience of oneself as being on the verge of becoming alien without ever dissolving completely.

Childbirth as Alien

How does the theme of anonymity and alienage in Merleau-Ponty fold back upon childbirth? To give some specificity to this question, I want to focus on two issues that generate insight into the alien structure of the body: (i) The sense of the body as taking over when giving birth, and, (ii) the sense of the strange wonder upon the first encounter with the baby at the moment of birth.

From the outset, labour is not inaugurated through personal intervention, but rather through waiting for the body to begin of its own accord. Levesque-Lopman, one of the first feminist philosophers to offer a first-person account of childbirth, writes: “Once labor has begun it continues independent of the will. It is as if a woman’s body is being taken over by a force. She cannot will the onset of labor,

nor can she consciously or intentionally alter its pattern once it has begun. It proceeds inexorably to its end regardless of her desires" (Levesque-Lopman 1983, 267). Once the process was underway, the women's body becomes implicated by the rhythm of her body, caught up in a process in which she has no choice but to submit to. Against this context, the pregnant woman becomes an actor in an event that is more encompassing than lived experience alone.

The start of labour from a bodily level does not, therefore, necessarily coincide with the start of labour from an experiential perspective. This is not only evident in the temporality of labour, but also in the sense that the body-in-labour is to some extent indecipherable. From a first-person perspective, establishing what is going on in and with the body is not obvious. When the contractions do come, then they are not experienced as contractions as such, but rather as a vague pain in her stomach, which is dismissed as being incidental. Far from a transparent surface, then, the body presents itself as a depth to be interpreted and deciphered. Contractions are understood as cramps, and the body in general is placed within the context of an everyday habitus and thus misread within the context of childbirth. The experience of one's own body is thus no longer sufficient to guarantee a knowledge of what processes the body is actually performing at a given time. And paradoxically, it is only when the body is mediated through the interpretations of other people or abstracted and measured with instruments that the body is verified as being in the midst of labour and thus re-integrated into subjective experience.

As the course of labour develops, the sense of the body as alien escalates. One way this is evident is in terms of being swept away by the sheer force of the body-in-labour. Several quotes here give us a sense of this.

The sensations are strong, overpowering, and can be at the same time delightful. One is swept away like a little boat at sea in a great storm of exultant emotions and a tremendous sweep of physical energy. The body takes over in what seems a wholly marvellous way ... We can only be in awe and deliver ourselves over, in faith, to this wonderful thing—the female body at the work of creation (Kitzinger 1987, 201)

At about 8.30 I had a contraction I couldn't really manage. My body wanted nothing but to push. I couldn't help but push three or four times ... For a moment I was completely freaked out by this violence in me. I didn't realize this was a pushing-contraction and that this was the last phase of the birth. (Carole)

Before [the epidural], between two contractions I couldn't rest, in fact I panicked, when I felt a contraction coming on, I panicked. After the epidural I could enjoy the moment more ... Because it's true that every contraction, I was scared every time, I was really stressed, and with the breathing, I wasn't managing too well, I really had to force myself to concentrate on my breathing...I wasn't comfortable (Annie)

We have varying interpretations of a similar event. In each case, there is a characterisation of the body as an overwhelming source of power, which does not derive from the personal subject alone but instead from a force outside of oneself. In the first report, the climax of labour is presented in near symphonic terms, as a sublime crescendo, in which all the parts converge in a seamless whole. We can only be in awe, we read, and submit ourselves in faith to this marvel. The aesthetic dimension of this account is framed not only by the language of awe, with its connotations of sublimity, but also the distinction between we who are bystanders to this event and the female body itself, which takes over in a seamless way. Throughout, there is a trust in the body as benevolent and

being on the side of the subject. For her own part, the subject can submit to the body without the fear of being engulfed by an unknown and alien force. It is true that the body is rendered a thing in this account, but this thinglike status does not impinge on the integrity of the subject—rather, it serves as a site of renewal. In the other accounts, the seamless integration between one's own body and the sense of the body as an overpowering force is augmented with a divisive and fragmented account of the labouring body as partially disintegrating the living subject. We find here a characterisation of the body as being irreversibly compelled forward by a violence that forges a division between the personal subject and her labouring body, in turn generating the experience of horror.

From where does this body horror come? There are several possibilities. The first is that the panic stems from an intolerance of pain and discomfort; the thought being that anxiety emerges in anticipation of a pain that is inevitable. However, it would be short-sighted to reduce the horror to an issue of pain alone. What is at stake in this and other such accounts is primarily a panic concerning the advent of a body that is no longer one's own. The labouring body, in its violence and autonomy, has become something that defies the story told of who one is. Alongside being a vehicle of pain, it has also disclosed itself as an alien object resistant to integration.

In the cinematic depiction childbirth as a site of body horror, what comes to the surface above all else is the sense of the body as escaping and defying ownership. Thus, the emblematic scene in Ridley Scott's *Alien* when John Hurt's body is parasitically employed as a birthing site for a new-born alien, what horrifies us as viewers is not only the visceral destruction of the human body by an alien organism, but also—more enigmatically—the question of who or what is giving birth to the alien.

On this point, Merleau-Ponty re-enters the scene. If we take the question of who is it that perceives seriously—especially given Merleau-Ponty's commitment to the bodily structure of perception—then must we not also rephrase the question in terms of *who is the subject of birth?* As we know, Merleau-Ponty advances an account of perception that centralises an anonymous modality of “almost impersonal existence” that subtends to personal life without ever being identifiable with that life (86). In Merleau-Ponty's terms, we entrust our personal existence to an “innate complex,” which effectively keeps us alive through operating on a latent and prehuman level. As we have also seen, for the most part, these zones of bodily existence remain integrated into a unified whole, such that there is no experience of the anonymous body as a margin that impinges upon personal life. This is also true of some accounts of childbirth, as Levesque-Lopman writes: “My body seemed to take over in a tremendous sweep of physical energy … As I tuned into the rhythm of my body, I had no doubt and my husband could only be in awe as I surrendered to the power of my body” (267). Not all accounts of childbirth conform to this sanguine interpretation of the body as taking over the subject, however. For other women, the sense of the body as a form of resistance establishes a radical discord that contributes to a partial erosion of selfhood. Heyes writes how “a host of body parts that had lain mostly dormant to perception were suddenly present in blooming buzzing confusion” (Heyes 2012)

In the midst of childbirth, the impression of the body as irreducibly one's own is revealed in the most visceral and immediate sense as a contingent configuration instituted by a thick network of habits, customs, and cultural practices and underpinned by an immemorial and anonymous undercurrent of existence.

In childbirth, this proximal relationship to the anonymous body is rendered possible thanks to the fact that there is the preservation of a personal subject gazing upon her own body performing a

series of functions, over which the labouring woman has little sway. Yet this is not a neutral experience, but instead one that is laden with affective significance, and which can teeter between anxiety and awe. It is worth recalling here that Merleau-Ponty will speak of the pre-human and inhuman world as “hostile and foreign...no longer our interlocutor but rather a resolutely silent Other” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 336). As a dimension of bodily existence, anonymity is without a face, silent, and yet it speaks through us; indeed, it employs the human body as its vehicle of expression. Benevolent or not, this sense of another agency speaking through the human body has implications for how we understand ourselves, as Jonna Bornemark puts it in her analysis of childbirth:

The movement of life is violent and doesn't really care about me, i.e. about that already constituted subjectivity. It breaks up and redraws the limits, and in this way creates new subjectivities. New forms are shaped, new distinctions are made, and new borders are drawn. In the midst of this violence there is still a small room left for a subjectivity that can think: ‘This will end. There will be time again.’ My subjectivity is not fully erased, but it is drawn toward its limits (268).

Bornemark captures the sense of the personal subject as neither wholly absent nor effaced by this advent of the body in labour, and it is precisely because there is a preservation of these two distinct levels of existence coming into sharp contact with one another that the event entails a strange tonality that can easily border on anxiety if not panic. In this respect, the metaphors of oceans and waves that emerge time and again in literary and clinical accounts of childbirth tend to be predicated on the image of “riding the wave,” such that there is an alignment of one’s own bodily rhythms to those rhythms which both precede and outlive us.

Where Did This Baby Come From?

These accounts of birth as involving a sense of the anonymous body as taking over, leaving the personalised subject merely one aspect in a larger scenario, establishes a strange tonality to childbirth. Upon birth, this atmosphere of strangeness is not expired, but instead retained in the immediate aftermath of the baby’s delivery. Merleau-Ponty himself notes this in his lectures on child psychology, writing that [w]e often note that right after the birth, a sentiment of strangeness, of unreality arises” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 80). One way this “sentiment of strangeness” manifests itself is in a question one finds in the literature; namely, *where did the baby come from?* Of course, the question is not a factual or empirical one concerning the different phases of birth, much less an appeal to Immaculate Conception; rather, it is rooted in a strange disbelief that the baby is finally here. Several case studies that attest to this peculiar moment.

The midwife handed her straight to me and I held her, but I had held her for a while, I just was – it was like looking at her and wondering ‘*Where did this baby come from?*’ You know, despite what I’d gone through, it was hard to associate that she was actually mine and she was out of my stomach ... Even holding her for the first few minutes are just, it wasn’t like she was mine, my kid, which is weird ... when you think of what you went through, it was really quite strange. (Tess)

Oh, I was just overcome, like, ‘*Where did it [the baby] come from?*’ My support people both laughed at me later one because they said ‘You just, like it was as if like, wow, I didn’t know that was going to come out?’ I didn’t know a baby was going to come out. It was just really spacey, a weird thing. (Kerry)

Where did the baby come from? There are several reasons for asking this strange question. In the first case, it is not obvious that the first encounter with the baby should entail unequivocal and straightforward affirmation. Given that there has been a lengthy gestation period, which has been framed by an inseparable alliance between the mother and her foetus, the eventual separation of these bodies carries with it a wide range of affective resonances. Beauvoir speaks in this respect of “an astonished melancholy in seeing [the baby] outside, cut off from her,” writing that “it is no longer an indistinct part of themselves but a piece of the world; it no longer secretly haunts the body but can be seen, touched” (Beauvoir 1989, 486, 490). Beauvoir highlights the strange metamorphosis undertaken between an intimate knowledge of the baby as an inner being whose flesh is figuratively and literally intertwined with the mother to a strange who now faces the mother in a whole unfamiliar way. As if from nowhere, the baby has a voice and a form, which is being seen for the first time. The encounter is uncanny insofar as it is framed by the disjunction between an inner world of familiarity offset with an exterior form that is entirely novel and thus unrecognisable.

But there is another context for the question of where did this baby derive from, and it is rooted in the narrative of labour more broadly. As we have seen, childbirth involves the interplay of personal and impersonal levels of bodily existence inhabiting the same space and time. This rapport between different levels of bodily and perceptual life unfolds in a dialectical manner; at times, there is a synchronicity of the body-in-labour with those of the woman-in-labour. At other times, these rhythms and temporalities disembark on a divergent path, resulting in an alienation from the body in its anonymity and elemental force. In the immediate aftermath of birth, this dialectical interplay of differing and divergent levels of existence tends to re-integrate, a process framed by the radical contrast between the duration of labour and its eventual closure, and grasped affectively in terms of a profound sense of relief.

What is significant about this is that it is only upon the resumption of the I that there can be a retroactive grasp of what the labouring woman has just undergone. Up until this point, when the body is said to have taken over, there is an adjoining diminishment of subjectivity and thus a partial surrender to what Merleau-Ponty described as the other “subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it” (296). As to the “I” that remains; it has become depersonalised insofar as it has been stripped of its personal attributes and swept up in the primacy of the anonymous body. At all times, it is implicated by a course of action over which it has little control. In this respect, childbirth brings to light in a most visceral way, the sense that, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “[e]ach time I experience a sensation, I feel that it does not concern my own being, but another self which has already sided with the world” (216).

Seen in this way, the immediate moment after birth is thus privileged, not only for its human value, but also because it involves a constellation of divergent modalities of life briefly occupying the same terrain. For a brief moment, anonymity and singularity converge; the body-in-labour is experienced with radiant insight in all its strangeness before it is reconsolidated back into the living subject. “From the head-nodding coma of an endorphin-soaked dream,” Cressida Heyes writes, “I woke up, into the fullest and most alive state of alert presence … I was aware of every detail of the drama as my body split in two” (Heyes 2012, 140). It is against this fleeting moment that the baby is handed to the mother, and she must now make sense of how it arrived while being caught up in the drama of a bodily existence that pushes subjectivity to a limit. “It is strangely miraculous,” so Beauvoir writes, “to see and to hold a living being formed within oneself and issued forth from oneself. But just what part has the mother had in the extraordinary event that brings into the world a new existence? She does not know” (Beauvoir 1989, 486). Beauvoir’s reflection is confirmed in a remark cited above,

namely: “It was hard to associate that she was actually mine and she was out of my stomach.” There is no reconciliation here between inner and outer, between the irreducibly anonymous and impersonal and the overwhelmingly singular and personal. Holding one’s own baby is not enough to integrate as one’s own. Disbelief intervenes; despite seeing with her own eyes that the body has arrived, it is difficult to process this data except as an abstraction.

The disjunction between a subject who is placed in the world and a world that cannot yet be placed is critical to the question of *where has this baby come from*. To ask *where this baby has come from* is not to make a comparison between the representation of a baby on an ultrasound and the reality of the baby in the flesh; nor is it to invoke a traumatic or pathological scene, though these dimensions may well be involved. Rather, it is to contend with an everyday reality that cannot easily be processed on an affective level except in the form of derealized scene whereby the materiality of things—the living baby—does not always entail a grasp of the baby’s reality on an existential level. Something in this encounter remains outside of reality, a non-possessable dimension of embodied life, which in turn generates a dreamlike sense of reality as being imbued with an aura of unreality and, conversely, a sense of unreality being shaped by an all too visceral level of reality.

To see with one’s own eyes what is not real is not to see an unreal world, nor is it to negate the world in its concrete reality; rather it is to see the world *anew*, as though for the first time. “Every sensation,” so Merleau-Ponty writes in relation, “includes a seed of dream or depersonalization, as we experience through this sort of stupor into which it puts us when we truly live at the level of sensation” (223). In pushing a living being to the edge of their subjectivity, childbirth does not introduce a new facet of existence into the world, but instead amplifies how human experience more broadly is structured by a “depersonalization at the heart of consciousness” (139). Such an opening issues a challenge to the dominant view, not least in some streams of phenomenology, of the self as a unitary and self-contained entity always in possession of itself. Thus, if childbirth is marked by an irreducible strangeness, then this strangeness is as much directed to the stranger who is born as it is the strangeness of the body which generates the conditions of birth itself.

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