A Place Within: Historicising the Womb as Inner Space

Heather McIntyre, 2005

In Utero. Somewhere up above us, a heart is beating. It is not our own heart, which flutters faintly in our chest, but a great booming pulse, reverberating around and through us, echoing in our new ears, sending its throbbing beats down from a cavity up above. While it dominates our soundscape, we hear other things too: the gurgle of intestines, the cracking of joints which stretch like beams across the roof of our womb. Muffled tones penetrate from beyond this body in which we reside, one a woman's voice which we have come to know well. Before our eyes, light dances through the skin and membranes which enclose us, forming cloudy patterns of red and yellow. Our own body presses against the uterine walls. But what was, until recently, a sensation of snugness has become a feeling of oppressive cramping, our limbs folded tightly above our upturned head. The walls begin to push us, urging us downwards, and a slick, red tunnel closes about our head as we feel ourself propelled along. The voices from outside are more agitated, the colours darker. We rush along this corridor of flesh; the booming heartbeat grows faster and vibrates through our compressed body. A sense of urgency – and suddenly all has changed. Cold air rather than warm fluid. Bright lights where once was dim obscurity. Heavy breaths shrieking out of the chest that was for nine months above us, and our own squalling noise arresting our ears. We are outside. We have been born.

Thus begins Dr. Derek Bromhall's *The World of the Unborn*, a 1988 documentary film charting the life of the foetus from conception to birth. Bromhall invites us into the space of the womb through an artful combination of endoscopic images and sound

engineering, 'replicating' the sights and sounds that a foetus/baby experiences during birth. We are asked to identify with the foetus/baby through representations of her embodied experience of 'the warmth and safety of the womb'. When she is pushed into 'the strange world that she has been born into,' we are swept along with her, re-experiencing the drama of our own birth in a screen representation of a purportedly universal experience. Yet while Bromhall's production invites us to experience the womb as if through our own body, we remain separated from this place by the technology which constructs our experience of it.[1]

The footage which opens Bromhall's documentary highlights some of the tensions involved in understanding how the womb-as-place has been historicised in popular memory. Firstly, Bromhall's images, and my narrative version which has attempted to render them linguistically, are both fictions: they emplot an experience which the foetus undergoes prior to the acquisition of language. The womb's unique nature as a place sometimes beyond language, sometimes beyond bodily experience therefore invites us to examine the respective roles of language, technology and the body in experiences and representations of place. Secondly, by blatantly aligning viewers with the foetus's perspective in birth, Bromhall brings to our attention other possible orientations towards the womb, including those of the mother and of the scientific gaze. Technologies of intrauterine visualisation, from the eighteenth century to the present, have overlapped with both of these additional subject positions. The womb is a place which therefore blurs the boundaries between linguistic and bodily experience, between bodily interior and exteriors, and between the various subjects which its space involves.

[1] *The World of the Unborn*, Genesis Films, 1988.

The womb has a dual character. For much of a woman's life, it is understood as part of the flesh and blood of her body, by both the woman herself and the scientific discourses in which she has been enmeshed since the late 18th century. In this imagining, the womb is an organ – more troublesome, perhaps, than other such tissues within the woman's body, but essentially just a constituent part of the matter hidden beneath her skin. When Bromhall's endoscope takes us inside the menstrual body, for instance, the womb is depicted from without, as a solid object which remains closed to the gaze even as it drips menstrual blood. However, with the onset of pregnancy, such an understanding yields to one which figures the womb as a *place*. It is not until Bromhall's film depicts the pregnant body that the womb itself is penetrated. Once an embryo takes up residence within it, the womb ceases to be represented as an opaque structure contained within the woman's body, and becomes an environment in which a new body begins to take shape.[2] This conceptual shift draws attention to the body's interior, a dimension of corporeality which, as Lynda Birke notes, has been largely overlooked in recent cultural analysis.[3] While much theory of the body seems to place its interiority beyond the frame of representation, we cannot understand the womb-as-place except by turning our analysis to the body's inside.

If this inner space only comes into being with the presence of a second body within it, then *two* bodies are involved in creating an emplaced understanding of the womb: the mother's, which *is* the place, and the foetus's, which occupies it and senses it around him/her. The womb-as-place is therefore only ever the maternal womb. Since it requires the catalyst of the foetus to transform it into a place, the womb is emblematic

[2] *Ibid.*
[3] Lynda Birke, 'Bodies and Biology' in Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (eds.), *Feminist Theory and the Body*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999, 43-4.

of the body's changeability, revealing how 'one woman might occupy differing bodies variously at any given point in time.'[4] More importantly, however, the role of these two bodies in creating the maternal womb highlights the multiple perspectives from which representations of the womb may originate. From the late eighteenth century until the contemporary period, the uterine space has been depicted from the viewpoint of both foetus and mother. However, the most powerful source of womb representation during the period in question has been scientific discourse. Designating itself as a *non*-position which reveals rather than constructs the truth of the body,[5] science has dominated understandings of the womb as place,[6] filtering into foetal and maternal representations of uterine space.

Before considering how the womb has been represented from these subject positions, however, we should briefly deliberate the particular problems the womb poses to an historical analysis of place. In his phenomenological approach to space, Edward Casey argues that place can only be understood through the lived body. Our sensory perception, he contends, emplaces us 'from the very first moment, and at every subsequent moment as well.'[7] In the case of the womb, however, Casey's notion of embodied emplacement can only be realised by the foetus. No subject external to the womb – neither the mother nor the scientific gaze – can experience the womb-as-place directly through their body. While the foetus remains the only subject capable of such phenomenological experience of the womb, an historical analysis of place

[4] Julie Kipp, *Romanticism, Maternity, and the Body Politic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, 7. See also Birke, *op. cit.*, 45.
[5] Cathryn Vasseleu, 'Life Itself' in Rosalyn Diprose and Robyn Ferrell (eds.), *Cartographies: poststructuralism and the mapping of bodies and spaces*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991, 55-64.
[6] Catherine Kevin, *A Genealogy of Pregnancy in Medicine and the Law: Australia 1945-2000*, thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Department of History, University of Sydney, 2002, Introduction.
[7] Edward Casey, 'How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena' in Keith Basso and Steven Feld, *Senses of Place*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, 1996, 6.

requires language in order to represent this bodily experience – language which, as most theorists agree, the foetus lacks.[8] It is only after birth that the infant gains the language to represent what he or she no longer experiences. It appears, then, that while the only subject to have a bodily experience of the womb-as-place cannot represent it through language, those subjects who do have language at their disposal can never write from an embodied experience of place. The result of this paradox is that our understanding of the womb-as-place can derive only from textual representations. However, while our 'spatial history' of the womb must 'begin and end in language',[9] it will become clear that representations of the womb from the 18th century onwards jostle for authority by approximating to the embodied experience of the foetus.

Late twentieth-century medical representations of the womb have their genealogy in uterine images dating from two hundred years previously, when published anatomical atlases first began to directly depict the dissection of pregnant women.[10] Conforming to the canons of realism, these images purported to directly transcribe impressions of the female body as they unfolded beneath the anatomist's eye, hand and scalpel. Before the 1800s, medical images made no claim to revealing the womb as it appeared in the process of dissection. Instead, woodcuts from the seventeenth century emphasised a theory of generation rather than the body's exposure to the gaze. In keeping with 'preformation' theories which understood the foetus as a perfect human

[8] Alice E. Adams, *Reproducing the Womb: images of childbirth in science, feminist theory, and literature*, Cornell University Press, London, 1994, chapter 1. This is not to suggest that language and body are completely opposed to one another. Indeed, Carter claims that our very earliest perceptions are culturally encoded and Adams concludes that such investigations are more likely to suggest the inseparability of the material and cultural bodies rather than to oppose them to one another.
[9] Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: an exploration of landscape and history*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1988, xxiii.
[10] Adams, *op. cit.*, 128.

who needed only to grow, the womb appeared as an upturned vessel in which a foetus, proportioned more like an adult than a baby, cavorted free from dependence upon the maternal body (Appendix 1).[11]

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, these 'ideal' representations of the womb gave way to images which prided themselves upon their approximation to the visual experience of the object. According to Michel Foucault, as the scalpel opened up the pregnant cadaver, the body's interior became accessible to vision. This 'clinical gaze' constructed the body's interior as an object of knowledge: once it had been seen, it became an entity about which truths could be spoken.[12] While Foucault's insights have become commonplace to scholarly understandings of the individuation of the subject, my concern is for their implications for comprehending the womb-as-place. For the womb's penetration by the clinical gaze can be seen as an attempt to take the sentient body back into the uterine space, aligning the viewer with the foetus. By attempting to replicate the anatomist's sensory appraisal of the cadaver, these eighteenth-century illustrations created a vicarious perception of the womb which turned it from impenetrable object to quasi-phenomenological space. The canons of realism were enlisted to make the world of the unborn accessible to those beyond the womb.

This shift towards an emphasis upon sensory experience in depictions of the womb was exemplified by William Hunter's *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*. Hunter's folio of 34 plates was first published in 1774 and met with great popular

[11] Karen Newman, *Fetal Positions: Individualism, Science, Visuality*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996, 27-33.
[12] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Vintage Books, New York, 1973, xiii-xiv.

success, running to several editions during the nineteenth century.[13] It included a series of life-sized sections of the female trunk from abdomen to mid-thigh, which depicted the various stages of dissection of a heavily pregnant woman. As one turns the pages of the folio, the images – beginning with the skin peeled back to expose the uterus – gradually unwrap the womb, until the last membrane is cut away to expose the life-like foetus curled snugly inside (Appendix 2). Hunter's accompanying text made clear his belief that realistic representation gave 'an immediate comprehension of what it represents,' as though the viewer were perceiving the object directly and without the mediation of illustration.[14] Hunter thereby claimed to be making the uterine environment available to the viewer's direct sensory perception, opening up its sights and its rich textures to create a phenomenological experience of place. While Hunter did not in fact render faithfully the body as he perceived it, but employed artistic techniques to render it more lifelike,[15] his project ostensibly enabled the scientific gaze to experience the womb-as-place through a simulation of direct perception.

Unlike the spacious wombs depicted in the seventeenth century, Hunter's uterus appears as a cramped, oppressively intimate space where the maternal and infant bodies are in constant contact.[16] Such a vision of intimacy confirmed the importance of the mother/child bond, which was being likewise constructed in contemporary legal and philosophical texts.[17] However, while the illustrations depict the closeness of the bodies, plate VI, depicting the foetus *in utero*, suggests that these two bodies are

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[13] Ludmilla Jordanova, 'Gender, generation and science: William Hunter's obstetrical atlas' in W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter (eds.), *William Hunter and the eighteenth-century medical world*, Cambridge University Press, London, 399; Adams, *op. cit.*, 129.
[14] Jordanova, *op. cit.*, 385-6; 390-391.
[15] *Ibid.*; Adams, *op. cit.*
[16] Jordanova, *op. cit.*
[17] Kipp, *op. cit.*

different in kind. While the mother's body is dissected, even butchered, the foetus's body remains intact.[18] Retaining its integrity, the body of the foetus can be understood as a site of individual subjectivity. By contrast, however, the maternal body, faceless and brutalised, lacks any traces of subjectivity: the focus upon the intact foetus has caused it to be sliced away by the anatomist's scalpel. Hunter's emphasis upon foetal subjectivity caused the mother's body to be transformed from subject to place, the womb becoming an environment laid open to science's sensory perception. The scientific gaze aligned itself with the foetus' perspective of the womb-as-place by attempting to render faithfully its bodily experience.

Hunter's representation of the maternal uterus at the end of the eighteenth century provided the conceptual origins for our understandings of the womb two hundred years later. The privilege which he accorded to vision as a bearer of truth has only increased over time, as science has developed technologies to provide increasingly vivid representations of the maternal womb. In post-World War II Australia, these technologies formed an important part of campaigns to increase surveillance of the pregnant body, in an attempt to reduce the maternal deathrate and to improve the quality of the national population.[19] The first attempts at direct visualisation of the live foetus occurred in 1958, using an endoscope – a flexible fiberoptic tube inserted into the living body. Similar endoscopic ventures generated great interest into the 1970s, although by the 1980s, their role was confined to pathological cases as the less risky ultrasound procedure became routine for most pregnant women in Australia.[20] Reaching their zenith in the 1980s and 1990s, ultrasound and endoscopy extended the clinical gaze beyond its eighteenth-century range, allowing the interior of the *living*

[18] Adams, *op. cit.*, 132.
[19] Kevin, *op. cit.*, 36-7.
[20] Vasseleu, *op. cit.*, 55; Adams, *op. cit.*, 135.

body to be experienced in real time. Furthermore, these technologies expanded the spectrum of sensations available to the scientific gaze, adding depth, colour and movement and allowing an improved simulacrum of the foetus's phenomenological experience of the womb-as-place.

In the last twenty years, ultrasound technology has become a standard procedure in antenatal consultations with expecting mothers, producing a highly personalised image of the foetus and womb. In these circumstances, the womb becomes recognisable as the woman's own specific interior, projected onto a screen beyond her bodily confines.[21] In an uncanny blurring of bodily interior and exterior, personal ultrasound images invite the mother to experience her *own* womb as place, turning her sensory perception inwards to her uterus. While ultrasound technology has therefore created a private and personalised experience of uterine space, endoscopic footage has been widely disseminated as a generalised, public experience of the womb.[22] Endoscopic images featured significantly in 1980s films documenting life before birth – including *The World of the Unborn*, mentioned above, and *The Miracle of Life* –[23] and reached an even broader public as they filtered into mainstream cinema.[24] Like Hunter in the eighteenth century, these films extol the truth-telling properties of their image's realism.[25] In *The Miracle of Life*, for instance, the narrator claims that the film is 'able to reveal – for the first time – some of [the body's] secrets through pictures [of] human organs and human tissues.'[26] Since such claims equate viewing of

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[21] Kevin, *op. cit.*, 100-102.
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *The Miracle of Life*, Swedish Television Corporation, 1982, distributed in Australia by Festival Records, 1987; *The World of the Unborn*, *op. cit.*
[24] See, for example, *Look Who's Talking*, TriStar Pictures, 1989; *Look Who's Talking Too*, TriStar Pictures, 1990.
[25] Vasseleu, *op. cit.*, 55-56; Adams, *op. cit.*, 142.
[26] *The Miracle of Life*, *op. cit.*

the images with direct sensory experience, the camera takes us inside the abstracted uterine space where we explore, as if with our own senses, the viscosity of its surfaces, the resonance of its sounds, and the range of its colours. In many sequences, including the birth scene narrativised in the opening of this essay, the camera removes images of the foetus from its representation, encouraging us to feel that *we* are the unborn creature who experiences the womb from within.

In those scenes which do depict the foetus, however, an important shift occurs in the representation of the womb-as-place. As the camera focuses upon the luminous figure of the foetus, floating in its amniotic sac, the maternal body recedes into blackness (Appendix 3). The infantile body appears to be adrift in nothingness, independent of the maternal body which has become an obscure backdrop. According to Adams, the mother's 'body disappears at the moment when the living fetus arrives in the foreground.'[27] This trick of the camera creates an impression of foetal autonomy, erasing the generative power of the female body. As Luce Irigaray theorises, although the womb is in fact the creative origin of the foetus, such images represent it only as a site for the projection of representations.[28] The tendency to identify the maternal body as a place rather than a site of subjectivity is not inherently pernicious since, as my earlier discussion suggested, this shift takes place as soon as the foetus is conceptualised *in utero*. However, Adams's analysis reveals how, over the last two hundred years, representations of the womb-as-place have increasingly downplayed the importance of the maternal body and the possibility of its housing a subjectivity of its own. While Hunter's images brutalised the mother's body, they suggested the richness of the foetus's experience of the womb-as-place; certain endoscopic foetal

[27] Adams, *op. cit.*, 154.
[28] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, quoted in Adams, chapter 11.

images from the 1980s, however, deleted the mother's body entirely, rendering it as a vast emptiness beyond the possibilities of sensory appraisal.

The above discussion has highlighted the ways in which multimedia representations of the womb have emplaced it by aligning the viewer with foetal embodiment, 'recreating' for the audience the sensations that the foetus feels *in utero* whilst concealing technology's mediating force. However, while sensory replication is crucial to these films' depiction of the womb-as-place, the accompanying language, which creates metaphoric links between the womb and other places, is also central to emplacing the womb. Geographic metaphors have long contributed to the womb's emplacement: for example, Hunter's 1772 atlas employed an extended topographical analogy which likened the sick body to a country under civil war or invasion, enumerating its 'lakes, rivers, marshes, mountains, precipices, plains, woods, roads, passes, fords, towns, fortifications, etc.'[29] While domestic metaphors which likened the womb to a house were popular earlier in the twentieth century,[30] the documentary films of the 1980s prefer spatial metaphors of a more epic scope.

Thanks largely to technologies of intrauterine visualisation which have enabled new imaginings of interior space, both *The Miracle of Life* and *The World of the Unborn* centre around two chief metaphors: the womb as ocean, and the womb as cosmos. Firstly, the films employ aquatic imagery to construct the womb as a sea within the body. According to *The Miracle of Life*, which begins with footage of the ocean, all life has its origin in the 'primordial sea', and 'the human body still possesses traces

[29] William Hunter, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, quoted in Jordanova, *op. cit.*, 395.
[30] Kevin, *op. cit.*, 128.

from that aquatic time.' Describing how the womb's amniotic fluid shares the pH of sea water, the narrator relates that

> when the animals climbed up onto land, they quite simply took the sea along with them, inside their bodies, so that even today, a human embryo swims in this water of life.

Both films extend this metaphor of the uterine ocean through their description of some of the womb's other features, such as the infundibulum which waves its seaweed-like fringes. Even the familiar narrative of the sperm's conquest is rendered in maritime language, as 'the sperm armada works its way toward the uterus.'[31] In addition to this sea imagery, the films' narration employs a second metaphor which relates the inner space of the womb to the outer space of the cosmos. According to *The Miracle of Life*, after penetration by the sperm, 'the ovum begins rolling around slowly like a celestial body out in space.' The camera shows it as a blue orb, cycling against the infinite blackness of the womb, as the narrator speculates that its counter-clockwise spin 'is to do with the rotation of the earth.' While attempts to recreate a sensory experience of place are central to these films' emplacement of the uterine space, language also constructs the womb as a place through the metaphors of sea and sky.

Even through such linguistic construction, popular science aligns its representation of the womb-as-place more closely with a foetal rather than a maternal perspective. As Carole Stabile contends, these images of uterine space, in the context of late twentieth-century abortion debates, represented maternal and foetal perspectives of

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[31] *The Miracle of Life*, *op. cit.*; *The World of the Unborn*, *op. cit.*

the womb in diametric opposition to one another.[32] While Stabile objects to those representations which depict the womb as a 'toxic waste dump', and not to the representation of the womb-as-place per se,[33] Adams is opposed to any construction of the uterus as a 'mere environment' for the foetus. Insisting upon an immutable difference between scientific constructions of women's bodies, and women's own embodied experience, Adams argues that women do not experience their bodies as places. In creating this distinction, Adams asserts that maternal experience carries greater authority and authenticity than scientific representations, since mothers' relationships to their foetuses are 'mediated through touch, not vision.' 'The real difference between me and [obstetricians],' Adams asserts, 'is that I experienced a pregnancy in real time: I felt the constant tumult as the baby… tested with [her body] the limits of my inner space.' Privileging embodied experience over any scientific attempts at approximating to it, Adams suggests that mothers are not so alienated from their own flesh as to experience it as place alone.

Adams's claims not only universalise her own experience of her body to all other women, but overlook the ways in which the language and gaze of science have influenced women's understandings of their own bodies. For many women, the language of science has become integral to their bodily experience. It is not that scientific language has papered over a more genuine embodied female experience, but rather that such language has become constitutive of many women's experience of embodiment. And in adopting scientific language in their descriptions of embodiment, women have understood themselves as place. The influence of intrauterine

[32] Carol Stabile, 'Shooting the Mother: Fetal Photography and the Politics of Disappearance' in Paula A. Treichler, Lisa Cartwright and Constance Penley (eds.), *The Visible Woman: Imaging Technologies, Gender, and Science*, New York University Press, New York, 1998, 175.
[33] *Ibid.*

visualisation technologies and broader scientific discourse are apparent, for instance, in Naomi Wolf's 2001 descriptions of her own pregnant embodiment. Wolf draws upon the same metaphors of sea and cosmos which are elaborated in late twentieth-century film documentaries. Describing her feelings upon seeing her foetus visualised in her first ultrasound scan, Wolf describes her womb as an unfamiliar universe inhabited by an extraterrestrial. Likening her baby to the famous screen alien, ET, Wolf claims that

> my baby looked like an alien because it *was* an alien… This was a baby in my belly, but it was also a time glider hanging poised in inner space... of course it was an alien: it hailed from another world.[34]

In addition to this cosmic imagery, Wolf describes her womb as an inner sea, making reference to her 'interior waters' and visualising her foetus 'suspended there, as in an ocean.'[35] Indeed, it is her deep understanding of her womb as place which colours her representation of her child, who, after birth, 'clung to [her] like a shipwrecked traveller.'[36] While certain representations of the womb as space, such as those which remove the mother's body, are inadequate to capture the full complexity of women's experience of their own body as place, Wolf's writings reveal that an understanding of the womb-as-place is not always incompatible with a woman's experience of herself as an embodied, sentient subject.

Because of its unique status on the brink of language and embodiment, the maternal womb is a challenging site to historicise. Anatomists, documentary film makers and female writers have grappled with how to represent this space which is truly

[34] Naomi Wolf, *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood*, Vintage, London, 2002, 24.
[35] *Ibid.*, 89, 106.
[36] *Ibid.*, 120.

accessible to the body only before birth. However, in their attempts to understand the womb-as-place, these authors have revealed some broader truths about the nature of place. Scientific attempts to open up the womb to sensory perception highlight the importance of phenomenological experience to emplacement. By attempting to give their viewers an embodied experience, scientists from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries assert the primacy of the body to spatial understandings. However, their efforts in this regard remain inevitably textual, only simulacra of embodied experience, and thereby highlight the vital role of language in creating an experience of place. While representations of the womb-as-place implicate the mother, the foetus and the scientific gaze, ultimately, attempts to comprehend the womb as place reveal little about an embodied experience of the womb, and less about the foetus's experience *in utero*. Rather, as Adams contends, these efforts say 'volumes about how an adult intellect makes up for, fills in for, the amnesia of infancy.' They 'suggest the urgency of the desire to reclaim that essential fragment of personal history' which relates to our origins.[37] Above all, then, representations of the womb reveal to us the importance of place to human identity. In the end, each of the subjects who attempt to understand the womb-as-place constructs a narrative of self-creation, attempting to re-experience a place lost to each of us at birth.

[37] Adams, *op. cit.*, 13.

Appendix 1:

Eucharius Rösslin, *The Birth of Man-kinde; Otherwise Named the Woman's Booke* (1626), from Karen Newman, *Fetal Positions: Individualism, Science, Visuality*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996, p29.

Appendix 2:

William Hunter, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, Plate VI (1772), from Alice E. Adams, *Reproducing the Womb: images of childbirth in science, feminist theory, and literature*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1994, p134.

Appendix 3:

Lennart Nilsson, 'Fetus at five months' in *A Child Is Born* (Revised Edition), Faber and Faber, Boston, 1977, p116.

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