

RACHELLE CHADWICK



BODIES THAT BIRTH

VITALIZING BIRTH POLITICS



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WOMEN AND PSYCHOLOGY

BODIES THAT BIRTH

to come

Bodies that Birth puts birthing bodies at the center of questions about contemporary birth politics, power and agency. Arguing that the fleshy and embodied aspects of birth have been largely silenced in social science scholarship, Rachele Chadwick uses an array of birth stories, from diverse race–class demographics, to explore the narrative entanglements between flesh, power and sociomateriality in relation to birth.

Adopting a unique theoretical framework incorporating new materialism, feminist theory and a Foucauldian ‘analytics of power,’ the book aims to trace and trouble taken-for-granted assumptions about birthing bodies. Through a diffractive and dialogical approach, the analysis highlights the interplay between corporeality, power and ideologies in the making of birth narratives across a range of intersectional differences. The book shows that there is no singular birthing body apart from sociomaterial relations of power. Instead, birthing bodies are uncertain zones or unpredictable assortments of physiology, flesh, sociomateriality, discourse and affective flows. At the same time, birthing bodies are located within intra-acting fields of power relations, including biomedicine, racialized patriarchy, socioeconomics and geopolitics.

Bodies that Birth brings the voices of women from different sociomaterial positions into conversation. Ultimately, the book explores how attending to birthing bodies can vitalize global birth politics by listening to what matters to women in relation to birth. This is fascinating reading for researchers, academics and students from across the social sciences.

Rachele Chadwick is NRF Research Career Fellow in the Gender Studies Section of the School of African and Gender Studies, Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

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BODIES THAT BIRTH

Vitalizing Birth Politics

Rachelle Chadwick

First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-12333-5 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-12334-2 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-64891-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK

For Barry Chadwick
January 2, 1939–July 21, 2015
My deepest inspiration in life and work.



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the culmination of a long intellectual and personal journey, spanning many years, academic departments, relationships and places. The journey was not linear or neatly progressive but punctuated with loss, self-doubt and disappointment. These acknowledgments are written primarily for those, both human and animal, that supported, loved and affirmed me through many difficult and challenging times.

First, I wish to thank and acknowledge the 64 women that shared their lives and motherhood journeys with me—without them this book could not exist. Thank you for your generosity of spirit and for gifting me with your precious stories. Thank you also to those that facilitated the recruitment process. In particular I wish to thank the staff and community counsellors at The Parent Centre and various private midwives working in the greater Cape Town area for their assistance and support.

I also want to thank the many teachers and mentors that crisscrossed through my life and inspired me over the years in different ways (mostly without knowing it) including: Tammy Shefer, Andy Dawes, Sally Swartz, Diane Cooper, Jane Bennett and Trinh Minh-ha. Thank you for intellectual inspiration, collegial support and for your discernable and inspiring commitment—to work, ideas and ethics. It has not gone unnoticed.

The empirical work on which this book is based was conducted while I was a PhD student in the Psychology Department and a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Women's Health Research Unit at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The book was, however, written while based in the Gender Studies Section of the School of African and Gender Studies, Anthropology and Linguistics at UCT. Thank you to my colleagues in the Gender Studies Section for providing a warm and supportive 'home' and allowing me the space I needed to write and to think.

Thank you to the Series Editor, Jane Ussher, for seeing merit in my project early on and for encouraging me to write this book. Appreciation and thanks are also extended to the anonymous reviewers who commented on early versions of this book. Thank you also to the editing staff at Routledge for their work on the book, kind assistance and patience!

I have been the fortunate recipient of generous funding and financial assistance from a number of sources, including the A.W. Mellon Foundation, the National Research Foundation (NRF) and the University of Cape Town. Without this support, this book would not have been written. In particular, I wish to acknowledge and thank the NRF for the generous Research Career Advancement Fellowship that was awarded to me in 2014. Thank you for showing faith in my research at a difficult time and supporting my intellectual work and growth as an academic.

My heartfelt thanks to my mother for her endless support and love—and for the hours she spent knitting baby jackets for several of the women who participated in the project. It is your incredible strength and commitment as a mother that has inspired my ongoing interest in women's reproductive, mothering and care work. The book is dedicated to my father who passed away on 21 July 2015. He was and still is a powerful presence in my life, providing me with a strong moral and ethical compass and a remarkable example of a life lived with integrity, courage, hope and honesty. I looked to my father for inspiration when writing this book and I found it. It was only through his example that I found the strength and willpower to get up morning after morning at 5 a.m. to write.

I would like to thank and acknowledge Don—basically, *for everything*. Thank you for being the most amazing and inspiring teacher—in your passion for ideas I found a kindred spirit. You have inspired me in every possible way and this book is a culmination not only of my work and thinking but of our joint journey. Thank you for believing in my work and supporting me through injury, illness, death and disappointment. I thank you—with all of me. Thank you also to our most beloved animal companions—Lulu, Mimi, Stornie, Robbie, Picky-Malinka and others (some departed from this world) who have befriended me and warmed my life over the years. Your loyalty, generosity, unconditional love and purity of spirit give me hope and always manage to renew me when life becomes challenging or painful.

Lastly, I wish to thank you, the reader, for engaging with my words and this book. I hope that the stories and voices within it move you, make you think and speak to you in productive ways. I apologize for any gaffes I have made or shortcomings in the book (which are undoubtedly there and entirely my own). My sincere hope is, however, that this book becomes a kind of friend to you (as so many have become for me) and finds a cozy spot on your shelf.

ABBREVIATIONS

CDC	Centers for Disease Prevention and Control
EFM	electronic foetal monitor
FREDA	fairness, respect, equality, dignity and autonomy
GDP	gross domestic product
MMR	maternal mortality rate
MOU	Maternal Obstetric Unit
NGO	non-governmental organization
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
WHO	World Health Organization

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OPENING

This book is about the fleshy politics of birthing bodies. To begin, it might be pertinent to ask: why this book? Do we need a book about bodies, birth and politics? It is well known that feminists and social scientists have studied birth extensively over the last 40 years. As a result, there is abundant research on the topic. And while bodies were theoretically sexy in the 1990s (see Frank, 1990), surely they are out of fashion by now? My argument is that while a substantial corpus of research has investigated birth and there has been widespread engagement with ‘the body’ and corporeality in the social sciences, there has been little research that has engaged with *birthing bodies*. Social science researchers have been largely silent about the possible political, ethical and theoretical implications and meanings of birthing embodiment (Walsh, 2010) and have tended to ignore the fleshy materiality of birth as a topic of empirical investigation. This is interesting given that substantial attention has been paid to other aspects of procreative embodiment (i.e. pregnancy, breastfeeding and maternity). Despite the undeniably ‘fleshy’ and corporeal aspects of giving birth, researchers have been reluctant to engage with birth *as a bodily event*.

My argument in this book is that *this silence matters* and tells us something about the ontological politics of birth. I will argue that it points to dualist understandings of the body that births in feminist, biomedical, midwifery and social science writing and debate. Furthermore, while birthing bodies are rarely directly addressed, problematized or theorized, assumptions about the nature of these bodies pervade medical, activist and social science discourse. Birthing bodies are thus paradoxically both absent and omnipresent. In this book, I explore ontological framings of the body that births in feminist and social science research, as well as in broader birth debates among midwives, activists, birth workers, practitioners and feminists. I will argue that many of these framings are problematic, limited and a poor basis for trying to imagine positive, affirming and alternative ways of doing birth.

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In particular, I argue that the failure to engage critically with birthing bodies has limited feminist debate, research and birth activism/s. Furthermore, narrow, dualist and homogenous assumptions about birthing bodies has limited our (feminist) ability to understand, conceptualize and ultimately improve, women's birth experiences.

We are currently witnessing a period of stagnation in relation to the feminist politics of birth, particularly in Northern settings, which has been argued to be currently characterized by conceptual impasses (see Walsh, 2010) and limited by narrow neoliberal valorizations of 'choice' (Beckett, 2005). The lack of engagement with the embodied, fleshy and intersectional ontologies and politics of birth has resulted in lack of clarity about what matters in relation to birth and misrecognition of the geopolitical and sociomaterial aspects of birth politics. Continued essentialist understandings of birthing bodies and pervasive mind-body dualism have limited our ability to conceptualize and fully hear what women are saying when they tell stories about their births. Furthermore, narrow binary conceptualizations of biomedical versus natural models of birth, usually written from privileged geopolitical positions, has stymied our ability to think of birth in alternative, heterogeneous and intersectional ways. This book puts birthing bodies at the center of questions about birth politics, intersectionality, agency, resistance and power relations and ultimately argues that engagement with the complexity of birthing embodiment has the potential to vitalize the feminist politics of birth and open new directions for birth activism and scholarship.

Why bodies, birth and politics?

This book is about birth, bodies and politics. The *politics* I am interested in is not the ordinary kind to be found in the daily newspaper or on the evening news. Instead, it is a politics interested in questions of representation and framing, as well as everyday, embodied enactments of inequality. This is *ontological politics* (Mol, 2002). According to Mol (2002, p. viii), ontological politics involves tracing, "the way in which problems are framed, bodies are shaped, and lives are pushed and pulled." This involves exploring the ways material-discursive framings are enacted, negotiated, lived and resisted by embodied persons in everyday practices and events. It is the ontological politics of birth that I focus on in this book. Women's birth narratives are used as openings from which to explore the corporeal politics of birth as played out in the South African setting and beyond.

Alongside ontological politics, I also focus on *birthing bodies*. It is my argument that birthing bodies are good to think with. Focusing on birthing bodies throws the politics of birth into sharp relief, revealing lines of flight between transnational birth debates, global/local inequalities, technocratic norms, ideological story lines and women's embodied birthing experiences. The birthing bodies that will materialize over the pages of this book will be multiple and emergent, morphing into different shapes according to the play of ontological birth politics and sociomaterial positionings. Bodies are understood as sociomaterialities: assorted jumbles of fleshy physiology, discourse, history, techno-science, tools, machines, intersubjective

relations and space-time politics. These are bodies shaped by multiple forces and yet they are also capacities able to act, affect, respond, resist and interact. Birthing bodies are not stable givens but uncertain zones that materialize and act in relation to an entanglement of crosscutting forces. There is no singular birthing body. Birth is never a matter just of physiology, biology or even culture. Birth is always embedded, emergent and *in relation to* sociocultural norms, local material structures, physiologies, intersectional and transnational relations of power. Birth is situated at the crossroads of body, sociomateriality, physiology, discourse, language and geopolitics. The birthing body is not one. Multiple birthing bodies become—materialize—through sociomaterial enactments and shifting ontological, epistemological and political framings.

To capture birthing bodies as complex, multiple and emergent entanglements, I draw on a range of theoretical and methodological resources and concepts in this book, including: Michel Foucault's 'analytics of power'; new materialist concepts of assemblage, diffraction and intra-action; Julia Kristeva's theorization of the relationship between language and bodies; and a dialogical approach to narratives (Frank, 2010). These theories, approaches and concepts are used diffractively (Barad, 2007) to trace birthing bodies as multiplicities that are not stable but materialize as/within fields of *relatings* between diffracting voices, practices and sociomaterialities. Birthing bodies have no singular or essential nature; they are fluid and permeable energies and capacities that become in relation to sociomaterial ensembles. Birthing bodies are thus not just represented by discourses—they are literally 'made up' (they become) via diffractive play between physiologies, space-time politics, discourses and sociomaterial inequalities.

Why now?

This book is written at a time when the global and local politics of birth are contested. According to Reiger and Dempsey (2006, p. 364) there is a "sense of crisis" about birth in the twenty-first century. Rising rates of biomedical intervention and caesarean section (across South/North divides), the hegemony of risk discourse, high rates of unnecessary maternal deaths in many Southern contexts, increasing reports of (predominantly Northern) women being distressed and 'traumatized' after birth and the growing clamor of birth activists naming obstetric violence as a global health problem, all speak to a current series of explosive tensions circulating in and around birth. In Northern contexts, pervasive biomedical risk discourse co-exists with neoliberal tendencies towards the individualization of responsibility and a consumer approach to birth. Women are thus ostensibly free to make individual 'choices' about birth while the overdetermination and ontological politics of these choices is often overlooked. As a result, some women in Northern contexts are left wondering about the disjuncture between their birth plan and their lived experience. For example, reflecting on her own highly medicalized birth experience, feminist psychologist Michele Crossley (2007, p. 559) laments, "I still do not know if I should be challenging medicalization or not."

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Along with the construction of birth as a biomedically risky event, there is also (paradoxically) intensive idealization of so-called physiological or ‘normal’ birth (see Rossiter, 2017; Vissing, 2017), particularly among middle-class, privileged women in Northern contexts. As a result, many middle-class women are left feeling like ‘failures’ (as women, as mothers) after birth via caesarean section. In the North, psychological distress, unhappiness and ‘trauma’ are widely reported by women after birth. Studies have found that more than one third of women in these contexts report their births to have been traumatic (see Creedy, Shochet & Horsfall, 2000; Soet, Brack & Dilorio, 2003; Baker, Choi & Henshaw, 2005; Olde et al., 2005). For privileged women in the Global North, birth is as safe as it has ever been but many women are unhappy with their birth experiences. For marginalized (i.e. immigrant, black, disabled, queer, trans) women in Northern settings, birth is clouded by social injustices stemming from a range of intersecting inequalities. For example, racial inequalities in the USA materialize viscerally as embodied inequalities during pregnancy and birth with evidence of substantial disparities in maternal mortality rates for black and white women. For example, according to data from the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC), black women are more than three times more likely to die during birth than white women in the USA (Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System, 2016). Such embodied inequalities are also visible on a global scale, with maternal mortality rates differing radically according to geopolitical zones (i.e. North/South). For example, while in sub-Saharan Africa there is a 1 in 36 lifetime risk of dying during birth, in high-income contexts the risk is 1 in 4,900 (The Lancet Series, 2016). While many women are unhappy with their births in high-income contexts, in the Global South, unacceptable numbers of women are still dying during pregnancy and birth. Furthermore, there is increasing dissatisfaction with the ‘care’ that women receive during birth and labor in a range of different settings and across North/South divides. While more than one third of women are left feeling ‘traumatized’ after birth in high-income contexts, there is evidence of widespread abuse, mistreatment and the violation of women’s human rights (to respect, informed consent and confidentiality) in many Southern contexts. In a global sense, all is not well with birth. Many women are unhappy with their experiences and pregnancy/birth remains a central locus for the reiteration of social inequalities, both locally and on a transnational scale.

Why here?

South Africa is a middle-income country of the geopolitical ‘South,’ with a long history of colonial oppression, racial injustice/s and apartheid. Despite the transition to democracy in 1994, South Africa continues to be a highly divided society plagued by violence, poverty and racial tensions. It is also one of the most consistently unequal societies in the world, with a Gini coefficient of approximately 0.69 (StatsSA, 2014). Birth politics are inextricably shaped by these sociomaterial inequalities and historical legacies. The health system, in particular, continues to be plagued by the aftermath of apartheid and racial inequalities that materialize as

sharp differences in health infrastructure and resources between the state-funded public sector and the private health care sector (only accessible to those with private medical aids). Approximately 8 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) is spent on health care in South Africa (Econex, 2013). Despite a relatively even split in the expenditure of these resources between the public and private health care sectors, the public sector provides health care to approximately 83 percent of the population while the private sector supports only about 17 percent of South Africans (South African Demographic and Health Survey, 2007). As a result, approximately 50 percent of health expenditure is directed towards a privileged, predominantly white minority. It is estimated that approximately 84 percent of white South African women have access to private sector health care compared to 32 percent of black African women (StatsSA, 2013). While the private health care system has advanced infrastructure, state of the art technology and a high proportion of highly skilled medical specialists, the public sector languishes with poor infrastructure, lack of resources, staff and available medical technology.

This results in vastly different pregnancy and birth experiences for South African women in relation to class/race positions given that the public/private split is still highly racialized (see StatsSA, 2013). As a result, most of the 83 percent of patients using public sector services in South Africa are black and poor (South African Demographic and Health Survey, 2007). While both public and private maternal health care systems are medicalized, with 96 percent of South African women giving birth in a health care facility (South African Demographic and Health Survey, 2017), birth materializes differently according to public/private institutional dynamics. Local maternal mortality rates (MMR's) reflect these differences and inequalities, with the MMR in the private sector estimated as 40 deaths per 100,000 live births (Bateman, 2014), while in the public sector the estimate is approximately 333 deaths per 100,000 live births (Bradshaw, Dorrington & Laubscher, 2012). Women in the public sector are thus approximately eight times more likely to die because of pregnancy-/birth-related complications than privileged women accessing private health care. Inequalities are powerfully inscribed on birthing bodies in the South African context, sometimes with life/death consequences. Rates of caesarean section and medical intervention also follow different trajectories in South Africa according to private/public sector dynamics. Caesarean sections are extremely high in the private sector, with estimates ranging between 40 and 82 percent (Rothberg & Macleod, 2005; Tshibangu et al., 2002; Naidoo & Moodley, 2009). In the public sector, the rate of caesarean sections is estimated as between 15 and 20 percent. However, certain tertiary level academic hospitals reportedly have higher caesarean section rates. For example, Chris Hani Baragwanath, one of the largest tertiary hospitals in South Africa, is estimated as having a caesarean section rate of 39 percent (Ayob, 2014).

Despite health care reforms implemented over the last 20 years, such as the provision of free antenatal care and obstetric services to all women, South Africa continues to have unacceptably high MMR's, which have not decreased sufficiently since 1990 (Bradshaw & Dorrington, 2012). In fact, MMR's reportedly increased

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in the period between 1990 and 2010 from approximately 150 deaths per 100,000 births in 1990 to around 625 deaths per 100,000 births in 2010 (Blaauw & Penn-Kekana, 2010). However, from 2010 onwards, MMR's have reportedly been in decline (Moodley et al., 2014). While HIV/AIDS is still a significant indirect cause of maternal mortality in the South African context, approximately 59 percent of deaths are due to direct causes (i.e. hypertension, maternal hemorrhage, maternal sepsis, obstructed labor and abortion) that are preventable with good quality health care. Reports of mistreatment, violence and the violation of basic human rights are widespread in the public maternal health sector (see Jewkes, Abrahams & Mvo, 1998; Rattner et al., 2007; Van den Broek & Graham, 2009; Kruger & Schoombie, 2010; Mathai, 2011; Chadwick, Cooper & Harries, 2014; Chadwick, 2016). There have, as yet, not been studies exploring possible mistreatment/s within the private sector. The excessively high caesarean section rates, however, point towards over-medicalization as a substantial problem in private health care settings.

Giving birth in South Africa is thus not a neutral, uncomplicated affair, nor is it only an individual matter or 'experience.' Birth is intertwined with broader body politics and social inequalities. In South Africa, birth politics are bifurcated and straddle both abnormally high levels of medicalization and caesarean section (for privileged women) and neglect, mistreatment, poor quality of care and high maternal mortality rates for low-income women. As a result, the South African context is reflective of many of the current global controversies surrounding birth, including: rising medicalization, bioeconomic neoliberalism and the politics of 'choice,' birth violence and mistreatment and complex entanglements between positions of privilege and marginalization and materializations of birth. South Africa thus offers a rich context in which to explore the ontological and corporeal politics of birth as played out in relation to geopolitics, race-class dynamics and gender politics. South Africa is a strange mix of high-tech and highly specialist obstetrics, neoliberal politics and bioeconomics, privilege and wealth *and* extreme poverty, lack of resources, Southern geopolitics and a deficient public maternal health care sector. As a result, it is a microcosm mirroring broader North-South bifurcations and offers an opportunity to explore the politics of birth from a Southern feminist perspective. This is important given that most feminist analyses of birth have been written from Northern geopolitical zones and have centered the experiences of privileged, Euro-American women.

Using a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of 64 South African women's birth narratives as 'data,' this book focuses on birthing bodies, ontological politics and the entangled modes of power and resistance produced in birth storytelling (see Appendix 1 for further details). Most feminist social science research on birth has been conducted with middle-class, privileged groups of women in 'Northern' geopolitical contexts. The feminist politics of birth has thus been dominated by the concerns and experiences of privileged women. As a result, many concepts and factors that have been extensively explored in relation to birth, including 'control,' 'choice,' trauma, the critique of biomedicalization and the idealization and endorsement of 'natural childbirth,' are predicated on the concerns of

women in the Global North. Unfortunately, this is often not acknowledged and the perspectives of privileged women are often treated as decontextualized universals. Literature on women's birth experiences in Southern contexts has followed a different set of trajectories. Scholarship and birth activism in Latin American contexts has been dominated over the last two decades by the critique of biomedicalization and the development of the concept of 'obstetric violence' (Pérez D' Gregorio, 2010). In African contexts, literature on birth has been dominated by public health research and predominantly been concerned with issues of maternal mortality and morbidity and abusive treatment. African women's birth narratives have not been widely explored. In many senses, there is thus a bifurcation in birth scholarship in which research on privileged, middle-class women in Northern settings and 'marginalized' women in the Global South, and Africa in particular, continue to develop and exist as separate literatures. Situated in the South African context that straddles boundaries between privilege and marginalization, 'First World' and 'Third World' realities, this book draws on material that attempts to trouble taken-for-granted bifurcations and binaries. The analysis moves between and across the birth stories of women situated in diverse race, class and sociomaterial positions. The stories of privileged (often white) South African women birthing in high-tech settings, and low-income, sociomaterially marginalized black women birthing in state-funded and under-resourced settings, are put into conversation.

A key aim of this book is to explore the multivocality of birth narratives across these sociomaterial divides and contestations. The goal is not just to explore individual narratives but also to position them in relation to ontological and intersectional body politics. My aim is to represent women (as they tell birth) as ambiguous, intersectional, embodied subjects caught in a sticky web of power relations, sliding between acts of resistance, compliance, passivity and collusion. This book is thus about the birthing bodies reproduced in women's birth narratives, but it is also about the messy, slippery relations between power, politics, agency, positionality, desire and resistance. Central to the exploration of these sliding relations is the matter of bodies. Recognized by some theorists as, "the crucial term" (Grosz, 1994, p. 19) in debates about power, agency and subjectivity, the book argues that thinking through and with birthing bodies is critical in efforts both to understand the full complexity of women's birth narratives and vitalize the feminist politics of birth. Given the focus on conceptualizing birthing bodies, theoretical frames are of critical importance to my project. In the following section, I discuss the theoretical influences that inform and shape my analytic approach in this book.

Theoretical entanglements

My work is shaped by a number of theoretical frames. A social constructionist approach to subjectivities, 'realities' and power relations (Haslanger, 2012; Burr, 2015) serves as one key point of departure. In constructionism, social life and norms are regarded as fundamentally shaped and constructed by language games, discursive frames and interpretative histories. Stories, accounts and talk are not seen as

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reflections of authentic experience or unchanging, pure ‘reality’ but are themselves enabled by broader discourses, circulating sociocultural representations and cultural narratives. However, my work is also situated in a relation of tension with social constructionist assumptions about bodies and materiality. Social constructionist frameworks, while offering important insights about the discursive social production of ‘experience,’ everyday truths and sociocultural forms of life, sometimes fall short when it comes to thinking through the material, fleshy and bodily aspects of subjectivity and sociality (Hekman, 2010; Chadwick, 2017a). Social constructionist approaches can be guilty of disembodiment and reproducing them as empty discursive fictions, fragmented and without substance. Matter and bodies often materialize only as static bedrocks or blank templates for social and discursive inscription. New materialist approaches (see DeLanda, 2006; Barad, 2007; Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Alaimo, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010; Pitts-Taylor, 2016) have developed as a result of increasing frustration with the limited framework/s social constructionism offers vis-à-vis the theorization of materiality, matter, the non-human and fleshy bodies. While I will be drawing on new materialism in this book, my approach is also strongly influenced by a Foucauldian reading of bodies and their relationship to power.

Foucauldian bodies and power relations

Within constructionist frameworks, bodies are conceptualized as social texts inscribed by sociocultural practices, power relations and normative discourses. In this approach, there is no natural or essential body that is knowable or separate from culture. Bodies are understood as passive templates that materialize in relation to linguistic and discursive frames (McLaren, 2002). As a result, theorists argue that there is no pre-discursive body intelligible outside of social discourse (Butler, 1993; Gatens, 1996). While some deny that he was ever a poststructuralist (see Hekman, 2010), the work of Michel Foucault (1979) has been particularly influential in thinking through the relations between bodies, power and discourse.

In Foucauldian theory, bodies emerge as the key objects and targets of modern forms of power, which work via surveillance, institutionalization, categorization, normalizing tactics and regimes of discipline to ‘inscribe’ and produce ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1979). Bodies are seen as the products of power relations, which involves both discursive inscription (i.e. interpellative norms) and material practices (Hekman, 2010). According to Foucault, modern power is no longer synonymous with oppression, domination or repression (although it does sometimes include such relations). Power is instead reconceived as productive and constitutive of selves, bodies and desires, as microanalytic rather than totalizing, and spread capillary-like throughout the social field. Power is also not necessarily only a force or form of coercion that is imposed on the subject from the outside. Disciplinary power operates via normalization, the creation of hierarchies and material mechanisms of surveillance and visibility that become naturalized. When most productive, disciplinary power becomes internalized as forms of self-discipline and self-policing;

the subject essentially becomes “the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault, 1979, p. 203). Disciplinary power thus does not only work to reduce, constrain, coerce or restrict but also enables, generates, produces capabilities, creates desires, shapes actions and constructs identities. As such there can be no pure ‘experience,’ personal choice, body, story or event that is *separate* from relations of power. While Foucault is often characterized as theorizing the body as constructed by discourses, his work on power is far more sophisticated and engages with questions of how to think through the relations between discourse and materiality or ‘words and things’ (Hekman, 2010). Foucault offers a dynamic and fluid theory of the materialization of bodies as occurring via practices, techniques and strategies of power. Power is not a ‘thing’ but a relation; it is also not separate from resistance. Power acts on the body but the body also articulates power; this is a relational dynamic that is thoroughly corporeal.

Foucault’s conceptualization of power will be crucial to the analysis in this book. The birthing bodies represented in women’s birth narratives will not be regarded as authentic reflections of unmediated bodily experiences. Instead, the ways in which women speak about birth and tell stories are regarded as framed by broader socio-cultural interpretive repertoires and cultural narratives. Power relations are seen as a productive and constructive force that leaks, mingles with and shapes birth narratives and women’s embodied experiences of birth. Traditional conceptions of power in birth scholarship often assume power to be solely ‘top-down’ and oppressive. In particular, biomedical power has often been cast as inherently disempowering and exploitative in relation to birth (i.e. Oakley, 1980; Rothman, 1982). While more recent feminist work has moved away from the ‘biomedicalization equals oppression’ thesis and acknowledged that many privileged Euro-American women actively desire and are even empowered by biomedical modes of birth (see Davis-Floyd, 2003; Fox & Worts, 1999), for the most part feminist scholarship is still limited by models of power that posit clear distinctions between power, structure, ideology and the individual subject. As a result, the finding that many middle-class, privileged women in the Global North desire biomedicalized modes of birth is often treated as transparent evidence of women’s ‘agency’ or personal ‘choice.’

The entangled relations between desire, choice and power have not been well explored in relation to birth, partly because of the impoverished theoretical frameworks often guiding research. While some feminist researchers have recently moved towards Foucauldian approaches (see Simonds, 2002; Maher, 2003; Martin, 2003; Chadwick & Foster, 2013), birth scholarship and feminist politics often remain caught in frameworks that define agency and choice in narrow, disembodied and neoliberal terms. In this book, power will be understood (following Foucault) as productive, embodied, relational, capillary-like and intertwined with modes of resistance (Sawicki, 1991; Faith, 1994; Root & Browner, 2001). As such, women’s birth narratives will be read as embedded and entangled with/in discursive and sociomaterial relations of power. Birth is an event that always involves multiple modes of power and politics. While biomedicalization remains a central (globally significant) force shaping the ways in which women give birth, it is always articulated in

relation to other modes of power, politics and sociomaterialities. As this book will show, ‘biomedicalization’ is not a singular or universal process. ‘Other’ modes of power have been largely neglected in the social science and feminist literature on birth, including gender, race, class and coloniality. Critically, this book shows that these modes of power are not separate or discrete but are themselves “relational materialities” (Fox & Alldred, 2017, p. 27) that mingle, intersect and intra-act.

While a Foucauldian approach to bodies and power is central to this book, it is supplemented by other theories. Exploring the corporeal politics of birth requires a hybrid theoretical approach capable of thinking through the intra-relations between fleshy embodied experience, sociomaterialities and discourse. While Foucauldian approaches emphasize the intertwined dynamic between power/resistance, and the subject is theoretically cast as, “a resisting and active subject, as well as a disciplined and normalized subject” (McLaren, 2002, p. 59), in practice most Foucauldian studies do not engage with the possibility that sensual, embodied, affective and fleshy forces and energies might exceed and disrupt the parameters of discourse and disciplinary modes of power. Instead, power and discourse are often assumed to produce interiority (see McLaren, 2002), and there is little recognition that tactile bodily and material forces might have agency or affective energies of their own. Foucault himself was interested in the ways in which the material-discursive might exceed or leak beyond language and words. As he notes,

Of course, discourses are composed of signs but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to language (*langue*) and to speech. It is this ‘more’ that we must reveal and describe.

(Foucault, 1972, p. 49; emphasis in original)

Ironically, in order to explore these issues further, it is necessary to look to other theoretical conceptualizations of bodies and materiality. While Foucault’s work might be less ‘discourse determinist’ than is commonly believed (Hekman, 2010), his work has become commonly associated with the concept of ‘body-power’ or ‘docile bodies.’ The resistant body or ‘body-resistance,’ while an important element of his work, has not been as fully developed. As such, I agree with Crossley (1996) that the Foucauldian concept of ‘body-power’ needs to be used in conjunction with other theories of the body if we are to grasp the complexities and paradoxes of embodied lives.

New materialism

In order to think the relations between bodies, materiality and discourse beyond a privileging of the linguistic, constructionist theories have developed in new directions. In particular, new materialist theory has emerged as a result of frustrations with the ‘discourse determinism’ of constructionism. New materialism does not reject the insights of constructionism but acknowledges and builds on them

(Hekman, 2010; Frost, 2011; Fox & Alldred, 2017). As a result, new materialists affirm the constitutive power of language and discourse but argue that, “language has been granted too much power” (Barad, 2007, p. 132). To rectify this, the constitutive and agentic powers of matter, bodies, biology, organisms and the non-human are highlighted (Fausto-Sterling, 2005; Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Frost, 2011). New materialism is a complex, eclectic and interdisciplinary set of ideas with diverse roots in the philosophy of science, feminist theory, poststructuralism, quantum physics, science and technology studies and queer theory. It includes a wide-ranging body of work on assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; DeLanda, 2006; Müller, 2015), the post-human (Braidotti, 2013), actor-network theory (Latour, 2005; Müller, 2015) and agential realism (Barad, 2007). Uniting these diverse concepts and theories is the desire to theorize materiality, social life and bodies beyond the confines of discourse, taking into account the agency and relationalities of the non-human, machines, things, biology, matter and bodily energies or ‘affects.’ New materialism thus moves beyond a narrow focus on (human) bodies as discrete objects of inquiry. Bodies are understood as emergent and fluid entities materializing in relation to a wide range of forces, including physiology, sociomateriality, discourse, machines, institutions, matter, objects and ecosystems. In this book, I will be drawing on concepts embedded in new materialist frameworks. While a focus on the physiological dimensions of birthing bodies is beyond the scope of this book and would require different kinds of ‘data,’ new materialist concepts of assemblage, diffraction and intra-action inform my analytic approach. I briefly outline these concepts below.

Assemblage

The notion of assemblage is drawn from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and is a key concept in new materialism. An assemblage is defined as, “a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them” (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 69). Assemblages can be thought of as emergent and relational networks, which include a wide variety of heterogeneous elements and forces, including: machines, discourses, architectures, animal and human bodies, biologies, norms, histories, technologies, institutions and materialities. These merge and collide in potentially unexpected directions, creating new entities and outcomes. As noted by Fox and Alldred (2015, p. 401), the heterogeneous elements that comprise particular assemblages materialize in, “unpredictable ways around actions and events” (Fox & Alldred, 2015, p. 401). Assemblages are relational arrangements that are not fixed or pre-determined. According to Müller (2015) assemblages are *sociomaterial* and non-dualist, disrupting any clear divide between nature and culture, social and individual, language and matter, bodies and politics. Things, bodies, selves and discourses are seen as having no fixed or essential ontological status but become meaningful—or materialize—only in relation to other things, bodies, selves, discourses and materialities. Agency is rethought as a product of particular assemblages, troubling the notion that agency is

something that an individual self or subject ‘has’ or ‘exerts.’ As a result, agency is seen as a capacity generated in assemblages. It is not intrinsic to human selves or a product of (human) discourse. Instead, non-human animals, machines, organisms, genes, environments, discourses, hormones and other forms and forces of matter are all imbued with agency, power and capacities that materialize in particular assemblages. Assemblages are regarded as performative and productive, comprised of relational exchanges that result in unpredictable affective flows and the generation of capacities, agencies, embodied subjects and ontologies.

In new materialist thinking, assemblages are thus seen, not as static arrangements of elements, objects, bodies and things, but as dynamic and unpredictable flows of intensities and energies moving between, within and among constituent parts. The various things, bodies, machines, norms, identities and discourses involved in an assemblage do not merely interact (thereby assuming some static separation between constituent elements); they *intra-act*. The introduction of the idea of intra-action (rather than interaction) is an important move. It troubles the idea that there are pre-existing, coherent things, bodies and categories and insists that things, meanings, selves, identities and bodies materialize with/in relations of heterogeneity in particular assemblages. The focus shifts from the ways in which (stable, coherent) differences ‘interact’ to looking at *practices of differings*. In the collision/s between parts, things, forces, words, bodies and energies, new relations and configurations are produced and heterogeneous terms and elements are remade. While Barad (2007) refers to concepts of ‘intra-action’ and ‘entanglement’ to capture these dynamics, a similar notion of the ‘mangle’ was introduced by Pickering (1995) and elaborated by Hekman (2010). Mangles are ‘impure’ and messy networks in which things, machines, discourses and other elements, are ‘mixed up’ to produce unpredictable and diverse outcomes (Hekman, 2010). The concepts of intra-action, entanglements and mangles allow for a non-essentialist approach to birth that focuses on processes, practices, enactments and becomings. No neat separation can be upheld between constituent parts of an assemblage; instead, they merge, blur, collide and form patterns of organization, arrangement and difference depending on diffracting relations and “interference patterns” (Haraway, 1997, p. 16). According to new materialism, differences such as race, class, gender, disability and sexuality are not coherent or static categories that exist independently or ‘intersect.’ Instead, they are entangled and relational phenomena that materialize in particular assemblages.

As a result, some have argued that assemblage is a more productive concept than intersectionality (Puar, 2007, 2012; Geerts & Van der Tuin, 2013). While intersectionality claims to resist ‘single-axis thinking’ and aims to explore the complex interaction of multiple axes of difference (see Collins & Bilge, 2016), the framework arguably remains mired by categorical and essentialist thinking and a tendency to see differences as stable entities. Puar (2012, p. 56) argues that intersectional approaches, “fail to account for the mutual constitution and indeterminacy of gender, sexuality, race, class and nation.” Theorists have also critiqued the limited conceptualization of power that frames intersectionality theory. According to

Geerts and Van der Tuin (2013), intersectionality is limited by its conception of power as only repressive and oppressive and lacks the ability to theorize or analyze the complexities of agency and resistance. Assemblage is regarded as a more productive concept because it shifts the focus away from categories and the assumption that axes of difference are stable components, to processes of materialization, diffraction and becoming (Puar, 2007).

Drawing on the new materialist concept of assemblage means the rejection of birth as a stable, decontextualized, biological event that is separate from culture and politics. Instead, birth is reconceived as a series of enactments or an emergent assemblage involving heterogeneous forces, relations and components. As will be shown in this book, birth is never singular but materializes in relation to intra-acting sociomaterialities and ontological politics. Stories about birth can also be thought of as assemblages. While stories would typically be regarded in constructionism as belonging to the realm of words, language and discourse, new materialist approaches allow stories to be reconceptualized as material-discursive assemblages through which bodies, boundaries, capacities and subjectivities are (partially) constituted. Birth stories are thus not reflections of ‘what really happened’ or pure products of discourse that bare a tenuous relationship to events. Instead, they are themselves material enactments, infused with ‘patterns of interference’ (Haraway, 1997) based on the overlap between heterogeneous elements, including fleshy bodies, discourse, norms and relational flows. Birth stories thus tell of particular birth assemblages or ‘event-assemblages’ (Fox & Alldred, 2017), acting as reconfigurations, diffractions and performances of these events. Furthermore, the telling and performance of birth stories, as part of the research process, can also be thought of as a sociomaterial assemblage. Fox and Alldred (2017) distinguish between ‘research-assemblages’ and ‘event-assemblages’ to think the dynamics between the event being explored and the research process. As opposed to a constructionist view, which often regards research findings as sociohistorical or discursive products that have a tenuous relationship to events and experiences or as constitutive of the objects/events being explored, new materialist analyses regard ‘research-assemblages’ and ‘event-assemblages’ as relational entanglements. In this book, birth stories will be regarded as sociomaterial entanglements of fleshy, embodied enactments, involving, “patterns of difference that make a difference” (Barad, 2007, p. 72).

Onto-epistemology

New materialism involves a shift from questions of epistemology to ontology. Theorists focus on the nature of things, matter and modes of being rather than questions of how to gain legitimate knowledge of the world (Fox & Alldred, 2017). As a result, the focus moves from questions about representation to ontological politics (Mol, 2002). Relational and entangled discursive and sociomaterial enactments literally make and materialize worlds, realities, bodies and subjectivities. Ontologies are thus conceptualized as fundamentally fluid, shifting, embodied