

## University of Tulsa

---

Fetal Voices: Speaking for the Margins within

Author(s): Susan M. Squier

Source: *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Redefining Marginality (Spring, 1991), pp. 17-30

Published by: University of Tulsa

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/463949>

Accessed: 03/03/2010 18:20

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=tulsa>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Tulsa is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Fetal Voices: Speaking for the Margins Within

Susan M. Squier  
*State University of New York, Stony Brook*

In the corner bar, there is a sign—bright white posterboard, three feet by two feet, with this message in big black letters: CAUTION. ALCOHOL CAN CAUSE BIRTH DEFECTS IN A FETUS. Why does the fetus get a voice? What of the alcoholic dying from a cirrhotic liver, the person killed by a drunk driver, the child abused by an alcoholic parent, or the bartender and waitresses whose livelihoods depend upon the bar's continued success? Why are there no signs advancing their rights?

That the government mandates the warning notice in bars, after a spate of publicity on fetal alcohol syndrome driven by advances in scientific knowledge, is one answer to those questions. Another would be to say that adults, and even children, can give voice to their own concerns, while the fetus cannot, a point aggressively put forward by an intensifying Right to Life movement. Although these two explanations give vastly different ideological constructions to the act of posting the sign, I want to move beyond the struggle for hegemony between research scientists and anti-abortion campaigners to ask a fundamental question. How do we explain the cultural phenomenon the sign marks, however we construe its ideological implications: the growing presence of a hypostatized fetal voice, speaking to us from the margins within?<sup>1</sup>

The current prominence in our culture of fetal images and voices, split off from the gestating woman and womb, undermines a cherished notion of the body's integrity and inviolability. The notion that the privacy of the body is guaranteed, that the body is "owned property" of the person, is a variant of the capitalist notion of the body as an object, a resource, belonging not to the collective but always to the individual. Feminists have used this aspect of capitalism to protect woman's procreative rights, arguing that since a woman owns her body, she has the sole right of access to it, whether for sexuality, procreation, or termination of pregnancy.<sup>2</sup>

But increasingly, the maternal, or more precisely the potentially maternal, body is no longer conceived of as a discrete entity under the control of the mother (through the right to privacy sanctioned by the capitalist system). Rather, it is seen as a being that colonizes another marginal and oppressed being, the fetus. No longer are the fetus's interests conceived of as

linked to those of the mother; now it is argued that fetal rights must be defended against the mother's—by outside, even state, intervention if necessary. This new focus on the fetus apart from the mother is fueled both by such technological advances in obstetrics and gynecology as ultrasound fetal monitoring and fiber optics and by the resurgence of the Right to Life movement and its base of support in the New Right.<sup>3</sup>

Fetal figures not only proliferate in contemporary culture and reflect its changes, they also help construct it. As Rosalind Petchesky has argued, "The 'public' presentation of the fetus has become ubiquitous; its disembodied form, propped up by medical authority and technological rationality, now permeates mass culture. We are all, on some level, susceptible to its coded meanings."<sup>4</sup> One of the most potent, though most often overlooked, sites of such encoding is literature, not only because "literature [is] a socially symbolic act," but because the literary canon replicates the ideology of its culture. Yet in literature we can not only see reflected and perpetuated the ideology of the culture and society that generates it, but also the gaps and fissures in which that ideology is questioned and subverted.<sup>5</sup>

Gayatri Spivak has argued that in the face of an increasing tendency to constitute the margins to serve the needs of the center, we must watch for and interfere with any systematic representations of the marginal. Following Spivak's lead, we can see that this specific encoding of the fetus as an autonomous, marginal being serves dominant interests, whether they be to abrogate woman's right to bodily integrity or to construct a cooptable, sanitized notion of marginality to substitute for others less tractable, more troubling. (Another instance of such substitution came in the mail recently: an envelope from an animal protection league, showing a photograph of a bedraggled dog with the slogan "The Other Homeless.") The mode of interference Spivak advocates is to reposition the marginal as central, the object as *subject* or *agent*.<sup>6</sup>

Yet if we wish in the interests of the mothers-to-be to resist these new tendencies to split the fetus from the gestating woman and to advocate the rights of "marginalized" or "disenfranchised" fetuses, we cannot do so simply by reversing the polarities, now advancing the central position of the previously disregarded fetus. This move not only threatens to support the essentialist arguments of the Right to Life movement, but it also contravenes woman's experience. Rather, I will argue that we can turn to literature to find an alternative representation of the fetus that is both more workable and more accurate: the concept of fetal/maternal relations as a border, a creative space of contestation, both linguistic and experimental. As I will demonstrate, literary representations of the mother-fetus relationship provide cultural confirmation of the assertion that:

We do not have to consider the fetus as a separate, alien being, locked in its mother's body, a patient we cannot reach without going through the mother. Nor do we have to consider the mother as a fetus container, a walking environment without social context. Women and their fetuses are bound together, and enmeshed in a social world. (Rothman, p. 165)

Two contemporary short stories by women embody the danger of such binary, polarized visions of maternal-fetal relations and implicitly endorse instead the vision of women and fetuses “bound together, and enmeshed in a social world.” In Jayne Anne Phillips’s “Bluegill,” a mother-to-be speaks to her fetus in a long internal monologue, while in Laura Freixas’s “My Momma Spoils Me” (“Mi mamá me mimá”), the fetus herself speaks to the implied reader. These texts come from different cultures and occupy different positions in relation to their American readership as well. In contrast to the widespread acclaim of Phillips’s short story, which was written with the support of a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts and published in a mass market paperback edition by Washington Square Books—a subsidiary of Pocket Books—Freixas’s short story is virtually unknown to English language readers. Published by Editorial Anagrama in 1988 in Freixas’s first collection, *El asesino en la muñeca* (*The Assassin in the Wristwatch*), “Mi mamá me mimá” is published here for the first time in English translation.<sup>7</sup> Despite the different material conditions of their production and distribution, these texts both challenge the construction of the fetus as a marginal being and contest any unproblematic notion of a fetal voice. They affirm the notion that a complicated relationship exists between the gestating woman and the fetus, a relationship that has social and political dimensions.

Before the fetus can be granted a voice, it must be granted a subject position. “Hello my little bluegill, little shark face. Fanged one, sucker, hermaphrodite,” begins Jayne Anne Phillips’s short story, “Bluegill” (p. 69). Phillips’s short story adopts and adapts the romantic tradition of lyric apostrophe to portray the relations between a mother-to-be and a fetus. In a study of poems by women writers dealing with abortion, Barbara Johnson has demonstrated that while male poets have created a rich textual history of the enabling metaphoric relationship between childbirth and poetry, female poets have seen the relationship not as enabling, but as competitive and disabling.<sup>8</sup> The figure of apostrophe—“the direct address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker”—functions in poems by Lucille Clifton, Adrienne Rich, Gwendolen Brooks, and Anne Sexton to embody the moral and psychic confusion generated by the abortion decision

(Johnson, pp. 29–30). Apostrophising the absent, dead, or inanimate fetus, the author animates, vivifies, and returns it to her presence. Whatever the authorial position on abortion before recourse to apostrophe, after its use the narrative “I” has engaged in “a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness” (Johnson, p. 30). Choosing the figure of the apostrophe, the author implicates herself in an ideology that grants personhood to the fetus. Yet while the poem embodies that position, it also embodies its opposite. For, as Johnson finds, when a writer apostrophises a fetus only to reenter the abortion debate in its name, she ironically positions herself as simultaneously bound to the fetus (granting it reparative life) and separated from it (by her enumeration of the reasons for aborting it). In the literary texts Johnson discusses, apostrophe thus embodies the “in between” nature of the fetus and presents the fetal-maternal relationship as a difficult space of conversation, debate, even argument.

But if the rhetorical figure of apostrophe functions to highlight the undecidability of fetal life when it is used by women writers confronting the abortion decision, what is its function when it is used to address a fetus who will be brought to term, perhaps even against the wishes of the community beyond that tight gestational bond? This is the drama of Jayne Anne Phillips’s “Bluegill”: turning away from a string of relationships with men from various social and economic strata, the speaker has focused all her affective energies on the fetus she carries within her, whose gestation is her sole activity during the time of the narrative. Yet in contrast to the discourse of the Right to Life movement, for example, in which the fetus is represented as a frail being subject to the will of the gestating woman from whom it must be protected, the fetus in this story is positioned as the one in control,

In some manner, I am in your employ; I feed my body to feed you and buy my food with money sent me because of you. I am very nearly married to you; and it is only here, a northwestern fishing village in the rains, constant rain, that the money comes according to bargain, to an understanding conceived in your interest. (p. 73)

The speaker figures her relationship to “Bluegill” as the junior partner in a number of more or less economic relationships: employment, marriage, a bargain. The speaker’s monologue (or more accurately, dialogue) suggests that she has chosen not to get an abortion, probably against the wishes of the father-to-be:

He faced me over a café table, showed me the town on a map. No special reason, he said, he’d been here once; a quiet place, pretty, it would do. One

geography was all he asked in the arrangement, the “interruption.” He mentioned his obligation and its limits; he mentioned our separate paths. (p. 75)

The speaker’s focus on the numerous different obligations she has to the fetus tends to undercut any sense of her as a subject capable of autonomous choice; initially, this seems to emphasize fetal personhood and fetal rights at the expense of “maternal” selfhood and experiences.<sup>9</sup> Yet the trajectory of the relationship between fetus and mother in this story suggests otherwise, for it develops from a sense of fusion to a sense of separateness, from one-way monologue to apostrophe and, ultimately, the anticipation of a dialogue.

Two different time frames conflict in “Bluegill”: the masculine marine time of the seaside community where the pregnant woman has taken refuge for the duration of the gestation and the more urgent feminine time of the community’s adolescent girls who have “read magazines, experimented with drugs and with each other” (p. 72). Phillips’s story suggests that there are different conceptions of gestation, different relationships to the fetus, and, flowing from these, different types of parenting. For the “many fathers” of “Bluegill,” choices are presented as clear-cut polarities (“addition and subtraction”), and as in fairy tales, “those first lies, those promises” (p. 75):

Directions are clear: crumbs in the woods, wolves in red hoods, the prince of temptation more believable as an enchanted toad. . . . Omens burst into bloom; each life evolved to a single moment: the ugly natural, shrunken and wise, cradled in a palm fair as camellias. (p. 76)

The story’s fairy-tale subtext presents a mythic world in which choices are clear-cut, essences are instantly discernible, relationships are codified and simple. The fairy-tale children of the Pied Piper of Hamelin have never changed from that first moment when he called them forth with his magic pipe:

They have grown no taller and experienced no disease. . . . They have no interest in talk or travel; they have developed beyond the inhabitants of countries and communicate only with the unborn. . . . Immortal, they become their own children. Their memories of a long-ago journey are layered as genetics: how the sky eclipsed, how the piped melody was transformed as they walked into the sea and were submerged. (pp. 71–72)

Time is turned upside down in the fairy tale, as the Piper’s static children both live forever and become their own children.<sup>10</sup> Repudiating the flux of the world of the born, the fairy-tale children of the Pied Piper claim for themselves an alternate language and a private set of memories. No apos-

trophe can call them from their involuted stasis, for they “have no interest in talk or travel . . . [they] communicate only with the unborn” (p. 72). Whether the father invokes an obligation with distinct limits (“one geography was all he asked . . . the ‘interruption’”) or a Pied Piper’s limitless allegiance, the effect is the same: the paternal perspective on the fetus renders it speechless.

In contrast, the mother-to-be struggles between silence and speech, fusion and separation. At issue is the conflict between maintaining unity with the fetus—because she imagines that as satisfying all her desires (“I believe you are male; will I make you husband, uncle, brother?” p. 69)—and relinquishing that unity in the name of a child whom she hopes will “break free of me like a weasel or a fox, fatherless” (p. 74). When she apostrophises the fetus, it is not in the cause of endless unquestioning loyalty and fusion, as with the Pied Piper’s children, or of total separation, as for the father who wants only one geography, the “interruption,” but rather as a request for help with the uncharted experience of gestation: “Knot of cells, where is your voice? Here there are no books of instructions” (p. 76).

The packed image with which the story concludes—of the drowned fishermen rising once again to the surface—intimates the separation of birth that impends. Yet here, too, nothing is simple: the struggle still must be waged between fusion and separation, speech in unison or speaking with a different voice. Even now the mother-to-be tries to enforce fusion: “I tell you *everything drowns*. I say *believe me if you are mine*.” But with the separation of birth impending, the fetus resists her call to fusion and pushes “like a fist with limbs.” And the story concludes with an image granting the possibility of fetal speech: “I am only witness to a language. The air is yours; it is water circling in like departure” (p. 77).

Although the focus on gestation, paralleling the persistent marine imagery that undergirds the story, suggests that the slow seaside rhythm prevails rather than the faster beat of the cities that the speaker left behind and to which the young girls are beckoned, such a correspondence is based on a fallacy. In fact, gestational development is neither slow nor static. Despite the popularity of ultrasound testing, exhibiting a deep wish to freeze fetal life in photographs, and despite the popular image of the fetus (from the “Silent Scream” film among other representations) that locks it (falsely) at the gestational age of about six months, in reality the fetus is always in process, growing toward birth as surely as we who are already born are growing toward death. As the contrast between the paternal and maternal apostrophes suggests, central to that growth is the profoundly social experience of being “call[ed] forth,” as Caroline Whitbeck has phrased it—an experience that as Barbara Katz Rothman points out “goes on for years, for a lifetime, but . . . begins before birth” (p. 105).

Sara Ruddick makes the point that in the movement from gestation to birth to mothering, fetus and mother negotiate different positions ranging from fused dependency to separation: “Only birth itself, singular and unrepeatable, expresses the metaphysical paradox of singularity and bodily conjunction. In this birth moment of mutual and utter dependency conjoined with incipient singularity are crystallized both the possibility and the necessity of ‘development’ and the ‘nurturance’ that developing, vulnerable separateness requires.”<sup>11</sup> Commemorating the process of gestation, anticipating the moment of birth, Jayne Anne Phillips’s “Bluegill” charts two developments, two callings forth: the fetal and the maternal. Just as the fetus develops from a knot of cells to the “fist with limbs,” so too the mother-to-be struggles from identification with the fetus to acknowledging its (and her) potential for separation in the birth that will be.

What would happen if the fetus refused to be born? This is the premise of Laura Freixas’s short story “My Momma Spoils Me”: after surveying the world outside, the fetus decides to remain within. The plot is simple: the fetus speaks, describing the reasons for, and results of, her resistance to birth and to the world into which birth would have catapulted her. The tension in Freixas’s text between fetal speech and the context in which it is spoken testifies to the oppressive results of that decision.

Turning the tables on our contemporary positioning of the fetus as the secret within, to be monitored by fiber optics, fetoscope, and ultrasound, Freixas’s story imagines a fetus that monitors the world by periscope from its chosen venue. The premise is a neat reversal of the Blakean construction of the child as innocent in a world of painful experience. Instead, although in utero “now for thirty-eight years” (p. 13), the fetus considers herself well informed about the world outside:

I know what’s going on; not from first-hand experience, thank God, but because my mother keeps me informed. Not a day goes by she doesn’t pass along information through my periscope from the newspapers: today an earthquake, tomorrow a civil war, floods, rapes, assassinations, flashers. . . . You’re better off inside where you are! So nice and warm, without a care, meals three times a day, *free*: not like those poor little Gypsies and Biafra children. (p. 13)

The fetus describes her seclusion as chosen, emphasizing the control she exercises through the media (newspapers and TV), by her own surveillance and by the offices of her informant, her mother. She speaks of her extended gestation as an experience of maternal nurturance and protection both from

physical need and from the intellectual and social burden of decision-making. If the fetus resists birth, it is in the psychological rather than the political sense.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, to say that the motive for resistance to birth in Freixas's story appears psychological rather than political is not to say that it resists political interpretation. Reading the mother-fetus relationship as symptomatic of a social milieu that replaces personal with commodity relations, conversation with mass communication, we could understand the long gestation as the mother's solution to the alienation such a world breeds. Where community is fragmented, so the argument would go, individuals turn inward and the nuclear family (even if, as here, still only potential) assumes greater importance.

Yet that reliance on the fetus as a locus of stability rests on a misapprehension (possibly even deliberate) of its nature—a misapprehension recalling the speech of the mother-to-be in "Bluegill." A fetus is always changing and developing, moving from a position of greater, to less, to no distance from what we are pleased to call "the human condition." But the fantasy of "My Momma Spoils Me" is of a fetus who is unchanging, always positioned apart from the social realm. And the mother has reasons other than altruism for providing it with an extended safe harbor in the womb. As revealed by the ironic subtext of the mother's indirect discourse, the motive for the delayed birth lies not with the fetus but with the mother; she is the dependent one. Without anyone else in the world, the mother is lonely and seems to find a kind of nostalgically regressive company in her internal companion:

We spend most nights watching television, she seated on the sofa with her mending and I peering out of the periscope. . . . Sometimes during the commercials I turn the periscope on my mother's face and I smile at her, and she looks down and smiles too, though her smile is a little sad, from so many years of living on the outside. (pp. 13–14)

The positioning of the fetus here as eternally, statically marginal by virtue of her nearly endless gestation would seem to represent less a late-capitalist disenfranchisement of the individual than a voluntary repudiation of social responsibility. Framing the fetus as marginal, and protecting/nurturing her, the mother can dismiss any need for response to those other marginal beings: "those poor little Gipsies and Biafra children." When she sees them on television, she need only congratulate herself for bearing her own particular burden: "Oh Lord, what a cross, what a cross to bear this little creature!" (p. 13).

Yet the fetal speech further reveals that the choice to resist birth is made in a coercive context; this self-marginalization has occurred as the outcome

of a power struggle between mother and fetus, to which the male obstetrical establishment has given its technological support:

There was a time when I couldn't wait to get out. . . . I was really brave; I wanted to devour the world. . . . Fortunately momma, who's no dummy, figured out what I was up to and she called the police; so, when I stuck my head out. . . . I saw all these muscle types with masks and forceps, so I popped back in quicker than a flash. (p. 14)

By framing birth practices broadly, focusing on the way they enforce and reproduce the dominant ideology, Freixas lends to the fetus's refusal to be born a wider significance, as emblematic of a willing abrogation of human rights. Shifting from the discourse of the self-sacrificing mother to the discourses of the prison and the colony, "My Momma Spoils Me" analyzes the forces that move people to acquiesce in their own marginalization. In the discourse of the penal institution, the fetus's decision becomes a choice of continued incarceration: "I get chills up my spine when I think what might have happened if I had actually escaped!" (p. 14). In political terms, it appears an informed and deliberate rejection of the Enlightenment legal and political institutions designed to protect the colonial subject:

That's when momma, who was terribly worried about me, started telling me about the world; and even though she promised she'd let me out after the nine months, because that's what the constitution and the laws of all the countries specify, I had already made up my mind not to leave no matter what, not at nine months, not ever. (p. 14)

The fetus, too, profits by this acceptance of a marginal position. Just as the mother's altruistic posture is belied by her obvious pleasure at the long gestation, equally suspect are the fetus's reasons for happiness: the freedom from fatigue or attack the womb provides and the toys and possessions she has accumulated. The fetus's rationalizations reveal the ideological implications of such seemingly objective categories as freedom and happiness; choosing the latter, the fetus accepts a mere simulacrum of the former. Freixas's story recalls Simone de Beauvoir's admonition that happiness is no adequate measure for the meaning of life: even a caged bird can think itself happy.

The fetal discourse reinscribes the increasingly prevalent pattern wherein the interests of each member of the gestating couple are opposed: the mother is figured as the colonizing party and the fetus is figured as the colonized. The fetus deliberately rejects the Enlightenment-based benefits of the postcolonial subject—constitutional rights, laws, and mandated free-

doms—deciding that despite the “constitution and the laws of all the countries,” she would “not . . . leave no matter what” (p. 14). Yet, as befits a colonial subject, the fetus identifies with the dominant group. She speaks not to other fetuses—who appear only as a shadowy group of “irresponsible people who, as soon as they’re nine months old, are already clamoring to get out. Not to mention, of course, the preemies, God forgive them, they know not what they do!” (p. 13)—but to the reader, who is of course within the dominant group: the already born. The outcome of this collaborative positioning of the fetus as willingly marginal, willingly colonized, is unambiguous:

—Whatever will you do when I’m not here any more?—wonders momma sometimes, with a sorrowful look.

Actually, we both know that everything’s been arranged on that score. I’ve seen it, even though I’ve never mentioned it. It’s been under the bed for a long time. It’s black with a cross on top, like they all are; only the top lid has a big bump in the middle. (p. 14)

The fetus moves from planning a break from the uterine prison to cozily anticipating eternal togetherness with her mother in an ingeniously constructed coffin *à deux*. Her fetal speech dramatizes the hazards of accepting a marginal position constructed to serve dominant interests—even when those interests are those of the mother-to-be.

In its mordant conclusion, Freixas’s story backs off from the fetus’s initial description of her position. At first she stressed her voluntary residence in a permeable womb, where she watched television through a periscope, exchanged smiles with her mother, and even received consumer goods as gifts passed across the uterine barrier (“a Miss Pepis dressing table that momma gave me on my thirty-seventh birthday,” p. 14). But replacing that earlier confident, even cocky, boundary play, her fetal monologue concludes by maintaining the absolute distinction between the unborn and the born, the minority and the majority. Only now, both fetus and mother have joined the final majority: the dead.

The story’s concluding image, which conflates pregnancy with burial, has pervasive cultural power, as the echoing imagery in this statement by the embryologist Clifford Grobstein confirms:

From a fertilized egg (a single cell) to the enormous complexity of the late fetus, [the unborn] lie hidden in the womb (or are part of an anonymous but perhaps embarrassingly obvious prenatal bulge). . . . That is almost more than an embryologist can bear. It is like hiding the Mona Lisa under a shroud.<sup>13</sup>

Focusing, as is professionally appropriate, on the fetus, the embryologist dehumanizes and even de-animates the gestating woman, framing her as the oppressor of the victimized fetus. Because she hides such intricate glory within her, she becomes the “shroud” to the Mona Lisa fetus. The step from privileging the separate fetus to objectifying the mother-to-be is a short one, yet its history is long: “The perception of the fetus as a person separate from the mother draws its roots from patriarchal ideology, and can be documented at least as far back as the early use of the microscope to see the homunculus” (Rothman, p. 157).

But to assert the centrality of either the mother-to-be or the fetus is mistaken, Freixas’s story suggests. The tension between fetal narrative and the narrative subtext subverts any such codes defining fetus and mother, whether we see fetus as victim of the mother’s coercion, or mother as victim of this system that privileges fetal life. There is evident irony beneath the fetus’s report of the mother’s indirect discourse: “momma is really good and, like she always says, —when it comes to sacrifice, that’s something I’m good at” (p. 14). And there is dramatic irony in the powerful final image of the black coffin whose top lid with its “big bump in the middle” is a visual rhyme for the mother-to-be. Even the title, with its eloquent misunderstanding of coercive oppression as maternal care, suggests the conflicts embodied in this brilliant, brief story: between individual and collective, self and society, neglect and nurturance, physical gestational development and postnatal psychic development, a fetal-centered world view and a mother-centered world view. “My Momma Spoils Me”: before the pivotal moment of Lacanian misrecognition, the title suggests, there has occurred a paradoxical, doubled, and even more pivotal misapprehension of the fetal self as spoiled by her mother. She has been spoiled in the dual and contradictory senses of “overindulged” and “damaged.” By inducing a fear of the destruction awaiting “outside” and a dependency on the indulgence available “inside,” this misrecognition has led the fetus to capitulate in her own construction as marginal, colonized, uterine consumer. And according to this same logic, we can turn the tables since, perhaps due to an earlier, similar misrecognition, the mother-to-be has come to excel at self-sacrifice and to depend on her procreative status for her sense of self-worth. Moreover, both world views ignore the reality of gestational experience for mother-to-be and fetus. “My Momma Spoils Me” dramatizes Rothman’s assertion that:

children do not enter the world from outside the world; they do not come from Mars or out of a black box. By the time they are born they have been here, in this world, for nine months: not as children, not as people, but as part of their mothers’ bodies. A baby enters the world already in a relationship, a physical, social, and emotional relationship with the woman in whose body it was nurtured. (p. 91)

To return now to those signs in bars: CAUTION. ALCOHOL CAN CAUSE BIRTH DEFECTS IN A FETUS. How do these two fetal representations in contemporary short stories by women illuminate the increasing tendency to posit, and then to speak for, fetal marginality? Phillips's story would stress the objectification and fantasy involved in any static notion of the fetus. Freixas's story would suggest further that fetal experience cannot be considered alone or without addressing the experience of the gestating woman and the society around her (including the medical establishment and other marginal groups—Gipsies, Biafran children). To do so is inevitably to distort the play of forces creating the split representation of fetus and gestating woman in the first place.

Yet it is not enough to play practical literary critic, rewriting the sign in the corner bar to include the experiences of other marginalized groups. We must become aware of the difference between articulating their positions and speaking—as we seem increasingly willing to do—for the fetus. Freixas's fanciful notion of a fetal narrator whose concerns are voiced to other marginal beings—Biafrans, Gipsies—who remain speechless reminds us that most other marginal discourses can be more authentically voiced than the fetal. To date, authentic fetal experience is not recoverable by any act of excavation or imagination unlike the occluded but recoverable experiences of women, African-Americans or Native Americans, or postcolonial peoples. Even more than postcoloniality, fetal experience has the paradoxical nature of being annihilated in its transformation: once the unborn becomes the born, whatever experience existed on the other side of the boundary is irretrievable.

There is a tempting and dangerous corollary to this fact: since fetal experience is irrecoverable (at least given the present state of scientific and psychological knowledge), the fetus can be spoken for without the risk of later hostile correctives. In this way, speech on behalf of the fetus differs from speech on behalf of any other marginalized or oppressed groups; at some time, the latter is inevitably, and often rightly, denounced by the subjects themselves as self-serving distortion.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, to speak for the fetus is risk free; like the mother-to-be in Freixas's story, we can congratulate ourselves for our sensitivity to marginal groups without threatening our sense of privileged centrality. As these short stories both suggest, if we are to grasp the relationship between fetus and mother-to-be, we must move beyond thinking of it in binary terms, beyond the notion that it is useful to define one as central and one as marginal. Rather, we must explore liminality and ambiguity, must both doubt and permit the possibility of fetal speech. We must ask, with the protagonist in "Bluegill," "Knot of cells, where is your voice?"

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We can distinguish between the relatively unproblematic assumption of fetal speech in the bar sign (whose goal is to combat fetal alcohol syndrome) and other more problematic instances of speaking for the fetus, such as the placard carried by a Right to Life protester outside a Planned Parenthood clinic: "Mommy, please don't kill me." Yet even the sign in the corner bar aims at regulating the gestating woman's behavior on behalf of the fetus, thus polarizing the dyad rather than seeing it as a dynamic relationship. I am grateful to Susan Strehle for her thoughtful comments on this part of the essay.

<sup>2</sup> See Barbara Katz Rothman, *Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1989), pp. 69, 71. Further citations will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the intertwined agendas of these groups, see Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman's Choice: The State, Sexuality and Reproductive Freedom* (New York and London: Longman, 1984), especially pp. 334–38.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, "Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction," *Feminist Studies*, 13, No. 2 (1987), 263–92, 281.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the socially symbolic function of literature, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); for discussion of the way literature reflects and perpetuates the patriarchal ideology of Western culture, see Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985). Teresa de Lauretis also discusses the role of symbolic process in expressing ideology, in her *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Post-Coloniality as a Field of Value," unpublished lecture, 14 March 1989, The Humanities Institute at Stony Brook. See also Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Jayne Anne Phillips, "Bluegill," in *Fast Lanes* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1987); Laura Freixas, "Mi mamá me mima" ("My Momma Spoils Me"), in *El asesino en la muñeca* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1988), translated for this article by Lou Charnon-Deutsch. I am grateful to Lou Charnon-Deutsch for bringing Freixas's story to my attention during the faculty seminar on Motherhood and Representation, led by Professor E. Ann Kaplan, The Humanities Institute at Stony Brook, Spring 1988. Further references to these two works will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>8</sup> See Barbara Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," *diacritics*, 16, No. 1 (1986), especially 38, as well as Susan Stanford Friedman, "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender and Difference in Literary Discourse," *Feminist Studies*, 13, No. 1 (1987), 49–82, especially 66–67. Further citations of Johnson will appear in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Because this fetal rights discourse refers, as does the Freixas short story, to the

gestating woman as the “mother,” I am adopting the same term. Yet it is important to emphasize that in so doing I elide a crucial difference between states. Though she is a “mother-to-be,” the gestating woman may possibly never become mother, for a number of possible reasons ranging from the medical to the sociological. Conversely, in this era of the new procreative technologies, it is increasingly possible that the woman designated “mother” may not have been the gestating woman.

<sup>10</sup> With the advent of the new procreative technologies, this topsy-turvy time sense has left the realm of fairy tales to become reality, for we are now able to invert the most basic human figuration of time: the march of human generations.

Should long-term embryo freezing become a reality, a child might be born a century or more after the death of its genetic parents. The child would grow up among the great-great-grandchildren of its genetic brothers and sisters. Would this matter? Perhaps it sounds more bizarre than it would prove to be in real life. The Australian National Health and Medical Research Council has considered this issue and said that there should be a maximum storage time of ten years, and in any case not longer than the “time of conventional reproductive need or competence of the female donor.”

Peter Singer and Deane Wells, *Making Babies: The New Science and Ethics of Conception* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 210–11.

<sup>12</sup> This is in contrast to Ariel Dorfman's *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), which I discuss in my work in progress on the literary and cultural figuration of the new reproductive technologies.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford Grobstein, *Science and the Unborn: Choosing Human Futures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1988), pp. viii–ix.

<sup>14</sup> The important exception to this is animals, who are even more profoundly barred from access to speech. Against the background of the proliferation of fetal voices, it is illuminating to contemplate the history of the development of primatology (especially in its obsession with bridging the language barrier) as well as the vigorous growth of Animal Rights groups. See Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (London: Routledge, 1989).