

open space

117 | less 'population' talk, more kin-making: on Manchester's B!RTH festival

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When was the last time a major UK city's theatre-going population spent four days being educated, entertained and spiritually moved by—almost exclusively—women of colour? The playwrights commissioned for the Royal Exchange's festival around birth inequalities were Swati Simha (dramatising maternal mortality, scapegoating and sterilisation in rural India), Xu Nuo (the gendered continuities straddling the end of 'one-child' policy in China), Marcia Zanelatto (the suppression of indigenous knowledges and rise of cesarean sections in Brazil), Stacey Gregg (patriarchy in Northern Ireland), Mūmbi Kaigwa (breaking silence around fistula in Kenya), Kirsten Greenidge (obstetric over-medicalisation in US history) and Liwaa Yazji (reproductive and sexual violence in war-torn Syria).

Those who performed the seven scripts, under the direction of Emma Callander (Theatre Uncut) and Natalie Diddams, are among the most talented I've seen: Elizabeth Chan, Katie West, Mina Anwar, Carla Henry, Nadia Emam, Perveen Hussain, Shobna Gulati and Abdul Salis (Gregg performed her own monologue about the abortion/infertility dialectic). The energy of these actors, and of Callander's direction, was humbling to behold. But there was also a bit of a pantheon of public figures interspersing and buttressing their performances, including Shadow Attorney General Shami Chakrabarti, 'MsAfropolitan' Minna Salami, artist Aowen Jin, and the Head of NHS Maternity, Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent.

While creatively directing B!RTH, Emma Callander said on Twitter that she was 'in exactly the right place doing exactly what [she was] meant to be doing'.¹ This conviction radiated from Callander's face on every single day of the symposium and it was largely justified. Elements came together; clashes, tears, antagonisms and collaborations were enabled. In addition to the plays, the programme featured interviews with the writers and associated maternal welfare advocates; art installations; and panels and workshops bringing together mothers of all genders, artists, scientists, policymakers and activists. It was convivial, accessible and humane. Every item was well attended, including daily debates, which were live-streamed to a substantial remote audience and engaged on Twitter (#birthdebate). Midwives, doulas, abortion providers, obstetric researchers, and migrant rights and reproductive justice campaigners filled the Exchange.

¹Twitter post, <https://twitter.com/emmacallander/status/787992047961640964> [last accessed 21 November 2016].

Hannah Azieb Pool opened one of the debates in a uniquely powerful way. She told the audience simply and candidly that her own birth had killed her mother. Pool's remarks touched on an important but little discussed dimension of our species: namely, the perverse and under-discussed capacity of the mechanics of human birth to cause the death of the person labouring. As the first female president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, Lesley Regan, said on the following night: '300,000 women across the globe will die purely because they became pregnant, and the vast majority have no control over whether they get pregnant'. This is a complete disaster. Indeed, what this tells us is that pregnancy is effectively a lethal epidemic in the world today. While 'over-medicalisation' is rightly criticised by midwives' movements everywhere, it is at the same time plain that birth needs to be taken much more seriously by societies in general as a source of needless death, not to mention unwelcome life (at least under existing social conditions). The best among the plays—Simha's, Yazji's and Zanelatto's—articulated this painful dualism vividly.

In Simha's play, *Ouroboros* (Callender, dir., 2016b), a city doctor goes to rural Jharkand to help mitigate maternal deaths and meets a world-weary midwife (*dai*). The *dai* tells the doctor of her cursed career: 'My hands have pulled death from wombs'. And, as the dizzying immutability of 'bare' life becomes clearer to the doctor, dead mothers and babies begin to weigh like spectres on the brains of the living. As the doctor struggles and fails to tend to a community deprived of electricity and hope, she ultimately stands accused by the *dai*: 'Your PROTOCOL is to save the mother ... but you'll be saving a sick mother who wouldn't want to live'.

That what makes a womb-bearing person's life worth living derives directly and solely from the productivity she achieves with that organ, is an idea that dies hard. Reproductive justice pioneers, such as Angela Davis and SisterSong, have been arguing for decades that the absence of freedom *not* to bear children is inseparable from this freedom to bear children—safely—and to raise all children already in existence in a safe environment. Representatives of organisations like the White Ribbon Alliance—and in particular White Ribbon Alliance's director, Brigid McConville, who attended all of B!RTH—likewise drummed into the heads of audience members: every possible investment must be made into making pregnancy safer for those who (bravely) choose to undertake it and immediately escapable for those who choose not to. Every possible investment must be made into eradicating the experience of unwanted pregnancy entirely, through the provision of contraception and abortion to men and women 'on demand, without apology' (Pollitt, 2014, p. 24). This classic slogan has faded from public consciousness. As Katha Pollitt (*ibid.*) observes, the pro-choice community has become extremely defensive 'since the 1970s, when activists proudly defended "abortion on demand and without apology"'.

The fact that there is demonstrably no real right not to die in childbirth reflects the ongoing undervaluation of women's lives, and the lack of priority and care accorded to non-commercial reproduction generally under capitalism. The maternal death rate is a social phenomenon, not a 'natural' one. Every mother's death—as activists from India told the audience—is a murder.

It is striking how little is popularly known about the unusually disastrous biological parameters within which our species happens to gestate. Human gestation features the extremely invasive hemochorial placenta, which dictates a type of placentation we share with almost no other animals (Sadedin, 2016). In a human body, the foetus comes first. As one evolutionary biologist puts it: 'Once that placenta

is in place, she not only loses full control of her own hormones, she also risks hemorrhage when it comes out' (*ibid.*). It's an unlucky design. If obstructions arise during vaginal birth, or if the placenta is not successfully birthed, the tissues separating the vagina from the colon and/or the bladder may die off and tear (fistula). In other words, if birthing labour doesn't kill the baby or kill you, it could still kill crucial genital membranes, resulting in a lifetime of pain, indignity and incontinence. Different kinds of fistula affect hundreds of women in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia who suffer stigma and excruciating discomfort sometimes for decades on end. This appalling situation—produced by a denial of adequate obstetric infrastructure and preventative care—was described in Mũmbi Kaigwa's beautiful and hopeful play *Orchid* (Callender, dir., 2016a).

As Kaigwa hammered home, our stories about wombs, vaginas and clitorises and what they can do, require radical revision. As professor of midwifery and 'free-birthing' Mavis Kirkham also told those gathered: 'midwives have a responsibility for the birth of the baby, the birth of the placenta, and the birth of the *story*'. Because, as Kirkham continued:

women are going to live with the *story* long after the baby is grown and gone. And stories can be strengthening *OR* they can be immensely undermining. And while stories are still plastic and being tried out in their early tellings, the midwife is still around. So, however the birth may have gone, there is longer to influence the story, which makes a big difference.

Instead, sadly, in the UK and other austerity-mongering nations, pregnant women are frequently guarded rather than cared for, medically traumatised, passport-checked, charged fees for their births and then subsequently culturally stigmatised for their reproductivity. In these countries, as Nina Power (2014) has formulated, 'Politics is so pro-child in theory *because* it is so anti-child (and anti-woman) in practice'.

All seven of the plays platformed as the official B!RTH festival's suite brought this contradiction to life. These seven were situated visually on a revolving graphic of planet Earth, which was projected onto a clear screen that backed the stage. So, for instance, before commencing Marcia Zanelatto's play *The Birth Machine* (Callender, dir., 2016c), the video would zoom-in on the geography of Brazil.

But there was an eighth play that was not located on this map of the world. It was as though the location of this play had been quite literally cast outside of society. It was a play about pregnancy in prison: *These Four Walls* by Laura Lomas (Callender, dir., 2016d). The play's two-woman dialogue is set within a shared cell. Following its matinée performance at B!RTH by the prisoner-oriented theatre company Clean Break,² there was a panel discussion with Rachel, who is currently serving a prison sentence and gave birth at a Mother and Baby Unit while in prison. Seated next to Rachel were three non-incarcerated women: a researcher, Rachel Dolan, studying mothers in prison; Naomi Delap, the director of a charity called Birth Companions,³ which partners prisoners through birth; and the governor of HMP Styal, Mahala McGuffie.

Yes, you read that right: a prison governor and a currently serving prisoner were both invited to comment on 'birth behind bars', as though there wasn't an enormous gulf of power inequality between them; as though imprisoning people didn't carry an inherently violent and punitive force. This gruesome 'conversation' was chaired by Clean Break's head of artistic programming, Róisín McBrinn. Despite allowing some tepid allusions to myriad abuses and moral problems attached to keeping expectant mothers in jail in the first place, not to

²Clean Break, 'About us', <http://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/> [last accessed 16 November 2016].

³Birth Companions, 'Birth charter', <http://www.birthcompanions.org.uk> [last accessed 16 November 2016].

mention separating them from their newborns either at once or after eighteen months (we learned that these are the reasons for the massive undersubscription to Mother and Baby Units in the UK; see Oppenheim, 2015), McBrinn's event came across as a eulogy for British prison 'care'. Someone in the audience asked: 'Why don't we all sign up to be incarcerated, since the welfare provision inside is apparently so much better than it is for unincarcerated people?'. The horror of a society which treats its poor so abysmally that prison becomes a potentially preferable option, went completely unexplored. So too did the list of deaths at the supposedly utopian HMP Styal—to which a new name was added just days after the festival: Celeste Craig (Rest In Peace) (see Rucki, 2016).

Despite or because of these silences, political antagonisms came to a head as the festival progressed. A wave of anger, mourning and impatience tangibly swept the gathering. This emotional heat was vented during the festival's final panel ('*Guardian* live'). This panel consisted of five elite professors and healthcare trustees (including Dunkley-Bent and Regan)—and the Oldham-native actress Shobna Gulati (famous from *Coronation Street*) who had movingly performed in two of the seven plays. The opening tenor of the discussion was decidedly uncritical of the root causes of maternal suffering. In response to this, Mukesh Kapila complained passionately when he took the mic: 'you're being very *REASONABLE*', he thundered, 'Don't [you] get *ANGRY*?'. Sally Hyman stood up and echoed Kapila's point. Speaking about the small not-for-profit organisation she has set up, CRIBS International, a network that supports survivors of impromptu caesarean sections in Greek refugee camps and helps pregnant refugees and their families escape the makeshift tents currently indefinitely housing migrants across the region, Hyman said:

in Greece ... there is obstetric violence being committed by doctors and midwives on refugees. ... The Red Cross are on the ground [and] they do not currently provide the ability for women to *stop* being pregnant. I have seen terrible things done by the Red Cross to small babies, whilst the head of the Red Cross in the US earns \$800,000 a year. This is a situation of desperate political inequality. It's being inflicted on people who have already suffered terrible, terrible things—we saw the play today about Syria. What are you, in your positions of significant power, going to do to put pressure on the Greek state, to put pressure on the EU, to put pressure on organisations like the Red Cross?

The solidarity and reflexivity for which Hyman was crying out, unfortunately eluded many of the people 'shaping policy' on biological reproduction in front of the cameras at B!RTH. We heard the vague message that we must *think of the children*, but there was no acknowledgement of the unspoken addendum: terms and conditions apply; the brown and black children of the displaced do not always count.

This tacitly violent universalism mirrored the elision around prison-based maternity described above. White supremacy in the context of border crossings was only mentioned by the activist stalls on the outskirts of B!RTH—never onstage. Yet scholars of reproductive justice are continually documenting the increasing role of whiteness as a premium value in commercial biogenetics, and of the persistent role of race in determining miscarriage, stillbirth, foetal ill-health and maternal mortality across much of the so-called developed world.

None of these issues can be separated. There is more than incidental connection between the politics of migration and birth. As Frances Stonor Saunders (2016, p. 7) writes, comparing the passage out of the uterus and the passage across geopolitical borders, 'the longest journey is also the shortest journey'.

Saunders (*ibid.*) recounts how on 3 October 2013, off the coast of Italy, lifeguards retrieved the corpse of 'an Eritrean woman, thought to be about twenty years old, who had given birth as she drowned. Her waters had broken in the water. Rescue divers found the dead infant, still attached by the umbilical cord, in her leggings'. What this unbearable scene demonstrates, once again, is much of Europe's willingness to view migrant mothering as expendable and less-than-human. The politically 'useful' figure of the migrant is not simply someone who moves: it is a racialised and transgressive figure. The active practice of this double standard can be seen in UK civil society's tolerance of the conditions at Yarl's Wood detention centre, where pregnant women are routinely abused (see England, 2016), and in the knowing decision to replace the Mare Nostrum search-and-rescue programme in the Mediterranean with Triton (see Capasso, 2015). It testifies to a failure of kin-making.

What do I mean by kin-making? Donna Haraway (1991, 2016), who wrote the 'Cyborg manifesto' twenty-five years ago, has recently called upon the world to 'make kin' rather than (necessarily) babies. Making kin, as Haraway (2016) proposes, is about becoming responsible (capable of response) to strangers. It is about ensuring we *matter* to one another, literally. The question isn't about passing on genes or family names, but rather is a political task: to become (at least) as enthusiastic and dedicated to forging relationships of hospitality, mutual dependence and comradeship with people of all ages, as we are about making babies.

This political ethic is, in part, a practical response to the looming trouble of human 'population' exacerbating the real structural crises of our time. The accelerating number (10 billion by 2050?) is certainly relevant to all manner of challenges, including ecosystem collapse and climate catastrophe. However, shamefully, the *false* problem certain think tanks like to frame as 'overpopulation' was given a lot of airtime at B!RTH festival. A huge infographic representing the total number of humans on the planet ticked ominously on the stage itself. The moderator for the festival's debate on population, Faiza Shaheen, unhelpfully arranged the discussion around the question 'is forced sterilisation ever acceptable?'. Faced with this question, almost anyone (except the most unabashed fascist) will voice the same response. Thus, this set-up guaranteed that the conversation obscured rather than clarified the important distinctions between the views held by the different panel members. Nevertheless, Shami Chakrabarti noticeably qualified her 'no, it is never acceptable' to enforce sterilisation with more nuance and less emphatically than Karin Kuhlemann, a board member of Population Matters (formerly the Optimum Population Trust), a charity that campaigned to ban Syrian refugees from entering Britain.

Adam Ramsay (2015) has reported that 'Population Matters has long called for "zero net-migration" to the UK: essentially, "one in, one out"—a position more extreme than the BNP'. Population Matters (2014, p. 2) has also 'suggested [that] child benefit and tax credits should be scrapped for third and subsequent children'. Many of the people who came together at the Royal Exchange would have raised hell if they had known this—indeed, several of the scripts were direct assaults on population thinking; however, such lines of contention were completely buried in the discussion that took place. Therefore, by approaching and situating 'population' as a prime concern of environmentalism, high-profile debates like this one shift blame from the rich and white to the poor and racialised. Seemingly giving a platform to a range of views on population, they help construct an acceptable face for hard-right policies.

Hearteningly, halfway through B!RTH, an audience member's saying, 'What can I do? These were powerful calls to action', elicited a broad murmur of agreement. A couple of answers were forthcoming inside the theatre, including Otoo-Oyortey's righteous critique of asylum policy-making: 'Where is the money going? Why go all the way to Syria to find people to help there, when there are people who have struggled all the way to Calais? LET THEM ON THE EUROSTAR AND BRING THEM HERE'. Otherwise, the most tangible transformational projects were only really represented outside, for instance at the CRIBS International stall. As Frances Perraudin (2016) observed in her *Guardian* review, B!RTH's makers did not see the festival as a 'campaign'. And perhaps that is just as well, since insofar as discourses emanating from institutions of the Global North are 'populationist', they can never make for a liberatory politics. These plays, like the words of the midwives, contraceptive health workers and abortion activists surrounding it, reminded us this year that the struggle to relate to a stranger continues long after birth. In Mavis Kirkham's words: 'If I can give birth to you, mate ... I can do anything'. And if I haven't given birth to you, then the struggle to make you kin may be even more arduous, yet even more necessary. This is particularly true if I can't see you because, for example, you're in prison or detention or at sea.

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Sophie A. Lewis recently studied Politics at the New School for Social Research in New York, and is currently writing a book inspired by that experience, *Full Surrogacy Now* (forthcoming with Verso). She is an editor at *Blind Field* journal and has published pieces at others, such as *Viewpoint*, *The New Inquiry*, *Jacobin*, *Salvage* and *Mute*. She has translated from the German, *A Brief History of Feminism* by Antje Schrupp (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017) and co-translated, with Jacob Blumenfeld, *Communism for Kids* by Bini Adamczak (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2017). In 2011, she graduated from the University of Oxford with a BA in English Literature and an MSc in Nature, Society and Environmental Policy. Since 2017, she also holds a PhD in human geography from the University of Manchester, entitled 'Cyborg labour: exploring surrogacy as gestational work'.

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