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With the Maternal: Encountering Performance Through Natality

Adele Senior

It's Christmas Eve. All the presents have been wrapped, the mulled wine is brewing, and upstairs my four-year-old closes his eyes and pretends to sleep in the hope that Father Christmas will arrive. In this moment of anticipation and waiting for the arrival of someone or something that is (to him and us) both real and imaginary, I am contemplating what now seems to be a very non-festive question that Noel Witts posed to me a few months ago as he prepared the introduction to the new edition of *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*: what do we regard as performance in the 21st Century? The unopened gifts lying under the tree remind me that this festive moment is actually not so different to the moment of performance. Waiting. Expectancy. Hope. Potential. Even though we can predict what is to come -- the wanted and unwanted gifts, the dry turkey, the not-so-funny jokes in the crackers -- there is still the possibility of the unexpected, the unanticipated, or what Derrida calls 'l'avenir' as the unknowable future 'to come', which never actually arrives.

In a post-Brexit, post-Trump world, performance has to be about beginnings. It has to concern itself with its own paradoxical potential to begin again or to begin anew. [Postscript: Otherwise, there is little hope for change.] Whilst I empathise with Diana Taylor's recent call to arms to claim performance as 'a very powerful weapon [that] we must fight for' (2016: 207), I am hopeful that twenty-first century definitions of performance will enact the co-created, co-shared moment of the performance they describe beyond the metaphors of mortality and violence that have often dominated our understanding of performance's transformative 'force'. This is not to deny that performance 'becomes itself through disappearance' (Phelan 1993) or that 'performance is always already a site of death' (Diamond 1997). Instead, it is to acknowledge performance in terms of natality and birth and therefore to shift our attention to

the unanticipated and unimagined possibilities of performance as an embodied and co-produced practice. When making and thinking about performance in the 21st century, might we find an appropriate metaphor in the co-authored, relational experience of birth with its generative potential to create new life?

A year has passed since I wrote this blog.[{note}]¹ My first child is now five years old, and I sit here at my laptop with my newborn snoring at my breast in a sling. It's day 40 of my maternity leave. Arriving on his due date, my second born is no longer 'to come'. Yet, the cliché 'the children are our future' resonates as a reminder that the natal -- a new birth -- is always the beginning of something unprecedented and unanticipated. This notion of the natal has its roots in Hannah Arendt's conception of natality as the 'new beginning inherent in birth [that] can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something new' (1958: 9). Arendt argues that because our birth into the world signals a new beginning as a unique being among other humans, we have the capability to act and initiate the new in the political realm.

To call birth a 'metaphor' for performance in this very recent post-natal moment now feels insufficient. It fails to do justice to the transformative potential of the labouring experience. In particular, it risks ignoring the role of the mother and the maternal perspective during the acts of labour and the beginning that Arendt tells us birth re-enacts through action in the public realm. This disregard for the maternal where birth as natality is concerned is not new. In 'YouTube Birth and the Primal Scene' Lisa Baraitser reminds us that 'Arendt retains a problematic separation of the concept of birth (natality), from subjects who birth (mothers), and is always in danger of producing another account of "birth without women"' (2017: 10). What follows, instead, is an attempt to demonstrate what natality offers performance from the perspective of a maternal subject. It does so through an account of the birth of my second child and three thematic gestures closely tied to natality: care, responsibility and appearance. As I have suggested elsewhere (Senior 2016), birth has been marginalized in performance studies -- as well as in the

Western metaphysical tradition Arendt identifies -- in favour of discussions of death and endings (1958: 9). So, what contribution/provocations might natality offer, as told from the position of a mother and a feminist, to future artists, spectators and theorists of performance? Specifically, what does a rethinking of performance through the natal alongside the maternal reveal about performance more generally, beyond what the issue of Performance Research helpfully identifies as 'maternal performance'?

1. Care

'Do you think you could do a urine sample, Adele?' I'm in the birthing pool hoping that another contraction doesn't arise before I make it to the toilet. There is a step up and a step down to help my ascent and descent out of the pool. The surface of the bath is slippery. I grab the cold, metal pole nearby that reaches from the ceiling to the floor to help steady my pregnant body. It resembles a pole-dancing stick and I'm immediately aware of myself as spectacle. I make it to the toilet without a contraction but as I sit down, sure enough, that familiar intensity rises in my back. Another one is on its way. The absence of my husband's hand -- which I have held throughout every single contraction so far -- catches me off guard and I'm anxiously calling out for help to get through the pain. The midwife dashes in and offers her hand while the pain consumes my body.

The gesture of an open hand, ready to absorb and share some of the pain, is full of care. In between contractions I'm overwhelmed by such simple acts of compassion. Of course, newborns along with the mother, the others, and the other others demand care but in the face of these multiple subjects, one is presented with the often-difficult ethical decision of who should receive care first and what constitutes care in relation to each person. Six hours into labour, the midwife offers us some toast. We laugh as she hands my husband the burnt slice. Unsurprisingly, mother, then baby, then dad is the order of care here.

To think of performance in terms of natality is to be mindful of an ethics of care. I often find myself using the word 'care' when commenting on student

writing and practice: this is really careful work; your approach lacked care; you looked after and cared for your audience. If performance is to 'begin again' and aspires to institute change by means of action, the act of birth at the centre of natality is a reminder to give and take care. Care is not about self-censorship or avoiding risks. It's not about health and safety assessments or diluting difficult or challenging work. Instead, can we conceive of care at the centre of all performance making not just work that speaks of, to or with maternal or 'vulnerable' subjects?² Such a practice would require us to acknowledge vulnerability as a human condition and, in particular, to contemplate what it means to take responsibility.

A fruitful model for a theatrical economy that does not necessarily see itself as born of caregiving can be found in Virginia Held's call to political institutions to draw on the mother--child relation to guide their activities (2006). Even after a decade since its publication, Held's work is timely for a theatrical industry that urgently needs to reassess its duty of care, particularly in the context of recent sexual misconduct allegations made against several public figures in the UK and US, including Kevin Spacey during his tenure at the Old Vic.³ For Held, care is both a value and a practice and, unlike prevailing moral theory that privileges the rational subject, an ethics of care is sympathetic to context and welcomes rather than distrusts emotions. Held foregrounds needs and responsibility in her definition of care as 'meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility' (2006: 10). However, the challenge is always in knowing to whom we are responsible and what that responsibility should entail. Natality prompts us to ask: how can we be careful artists and theorists in the face of these ethical problems?

2. Responsibility

The unanswerable question of responsibility has dominated my previous research on bioart because of its practice of employing animals, plants, cells and tissues (Senior 2014a, 2014b). In this context established ethical frameworks that privilege responsibility as a legal duty, moral obligation or established protocol offer little to bioart practice since moral codes concerning how to treat certain kinds of life that appear in art rather than scientific

research have yet to be formed. However, since becoming a mother the notion of responsibility as care has become an even more complex concern for me, not least in my encounters with performance. During a performance called Partus by Third Angel, which I saw at the Crucible Theatre Studio in 2016, I was struck by the care demonstrated for an audience of mainly mums, dads, grandparents, babies and children. From tea and biscuits served during an interval to baby-friendly performances, the company demonstrated great care for their audience. Perhaps this is not surprising since the work was about labour, birth and birth stories and the basic 'needs' of this kind of audience are fairly discernible: breaks, food, drinks. Yet, the verbatim form, which utilized actual birth stories offered by parents, midwives and others during the creative process, necessarily makes issues of care and responsibility -- regardless of ethical assurances of consent -- more complex when considered in terms of 'needs'. As postcolonialism has taught us, telling the stories of others is always potentially violent in claiming to know what constitutes their needs.

Similarly, the act of mothering involves the unresolvable tension of, on the one hand, altruistically caring for one's child and, on the other hand, determining their particular needs for them during pregnancy and beyond. Derridean and Levinasian ethics, founded on the idea of establishing a relationship of responsibility to the Other, go some way to understanding this problem of naming the other and therefore reducing them to the same in an ethical attempt to recognize their alterity (Derrida 1995; Levinas 1969), but negotiating this paradox necessarily demands practice. This is where performance can offer a place for beginners (in the Arendtian sense) to act in unprecedented and novel ways to navigate this terrain of responsibility. **A natal approach to performance welcomes the dual nature of responsibility as both duty and also beyond duty.** In other words, natality welcomes both rules and moral guidance from existing ethical frameworks but also recognizes when these are limited. In relation to Partus, for example, Held's definition of care comes under strain because the use of verbatim does not intentionally set out to meet the 'needs' of those who offered their stories, even while the work might demonstrate care for them.

While questions of ethics are not new to theatre and performance studies (Read 2005 Ridout 2009) perhaps we can find in performance new ways of addressing the problem of responsibility and the ambiguity of care at the crossroads where the maternal and the natal meet. As the edition of On the Maternal demonstrates, maternal performance offers nuanced care practices from which performance practice more widely can draw. Some maternal performance, for example, realizes and interrogates theoretical conceptualizations of care such as Bracha Ettinger's 'carriance' (2015) as carrying and caring and Sara Ruddick's idea of 'mothering' (1990) as a practice open to all parents and carers regardless of gender (see Vanraes 2017). Such works often foreground the relational aspects between mother--infant and, in doing so, draw attention to the natal potential of performance as a relational experience wherein we (the makers, performers, spectators) have the potential to act politically.{{note}}4 By 'acting politically' I mean to assert one's difference in relation to the plurality of others in the moment of performance or as Alison Stone suggests:

In acting politically I activate my unique existence. I can do so fully only in acting politically, for Arendt in The Human Condition, because my uniqueness is relational. To be unique is to differ from others, so that I can be unique only because I am constitutively in relations with others, one of a plurality. (2010: 355--6)

Performance is founded on the assumption of plurality between performer and spectator where both sides can potentially speak and act and therefore, to quote Stone, 'activate their unique existence'. Meanwhile, maternal performance specifically explores acts of care and sometimes 'carelessness'. A meeting between the natal aspects of performance and maternal performance's exploration of care provides an important space for investigating and practising responsibility in novel ways.

My focus on care as responsibility is one born out of a feminist interpretation of natality since Arendt's conceptualization does not account for the mother as

the first Other at birth. However, by invoking the need for an ethics of care as responsibility when making, spectating or theorizing performance in the contemporary context, I risk reinscribing ‘the paradigm [of an ethics of care that] ends up consolidating the binary patriarchal economy, confirming the sacrificial role assigned to women’ (Cavarero, Guslandi and Bruhns 2014: 25). Instead, it is worth noting that the hand that holds and grounds me while in labour could be any hand, regardless of sex or gender identity. As Adriana Cavarero suggests ‘since we were born, haven’t we all been infants? And what prevents men, as well as women, from taking care of the infant and of vulnerable creatures in general?’ (27). From the position of the natal, the caregiver could be anyone.

3. Appearance

A natal thinking of performance explores performance as a space of appearance -- rather than (solely) a space of disappearance -- where unprecedented action is possible. ‘He’s getting tired now Adele; I’m going to need you to push a bit harder.’ I remember feeling like I was going to die; like we were both going to die. The pain was too much. He was moving down the birth canal spine-to-spine and I was past the point of receiving additional pain relief beyond gas and air. The moments of quiet, in between the contractions, were deafening. I can’t do this. I can’t. The fearful look on my husband’s face. This is impossible. Burning. And then, he appears. I feel rather than see him.

The generative potential to create life always involves the possibility of death for both mother and child. Birth is not the absence of death. One need only look at maternal and infant death statistics to appreciate that death can be a material reality of labour. Instead, to think of performance in terms of birth is to welcome death. Not death as finality, disappearance or theoretically inspired mortalities that have provided comfort for the post-structuralists among us (death of the author, death of literature etc.) but death as the unknown and the unknowable. To elevate birth as a way of thinking through performance is not concerned with reversing and reiterating this birth/death binary against the backdrop of already well-established critiques of performance studies’ death

drive (Schneider 2001; Read 2009; Bennett 2010). Instead, to privilege birth, and its relation to the unknown of death, is to ask: what might performance look like if we approach it as both a maternal and a natal 'space of appearance'?

For Arendt a 'space of appearance' is 'the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men [sic] exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly' (1958: 198--9). Crucially this is where political action occurs for Arendt. However, Arendt's work has drawn criticism for its masculinized notion of natality as a heroic act of uniqueness and action in the public realm while actual birth is relegated to the private sphere of the home (Stone 2010: 356). Furthermore, Arendt asserts that newborns and children should be protected from the public/political realm (1993 [1961]). By considering the way in which maternal performance problematizes normative public/private distinctions by attending to feminist practices of maternal labour (as exemplified in the issue of On the Maternal), we can move beyond masculinized conceptions of politics on which Arendt's thinking around natality is founded. Similarly if we reinstitute the unknown that the newborn brings in birth in the concept of natality, rather than using natality to regulate who has the capacity to participate in the political realm as Arendt does, we can look forward to a natal politics of performance that is still consistent with Arendtian ideals of 'civic responsibility, collaboration and ethical action' (Williams 1999: 222) but that welcomes those othered by her version of natality (i.e. newborns, children and those who literally cannot speak). More specifically, if we reconceive of natality as tied to the materiality of one's birth, that is, 'coming from the mother's womb' (Cavarero 1995: 6), a conception of performance grounded first in natality is intimately connected with embodiment and the experiential beyond the ocular. We might, therefore, think of appearance in performance not necessarily as seeing the other's uniqueness but feeling, hearing, smelling, tasting and being moved by them in such a way that echoes something of the moment of that first meeting common to birth. Performance and birth, it turns out, might not be so different after all.

Notes

1 The original blog appears here:

<https://adelesenior.wordpress.com/2016/12/24/professing-performance-again/>

2 Discussions of care in theatre and performance studies are currently gaining momentum, as exemplified by the 2016 'Performing Care' symposium hosted at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and organized by Amanda Stuart Fisher and James Thompson.

3 See, for example, 'Here Are All the Public Figures Who've Been Accused of Sexual Misconduct After Harvey Weinstein': <http://time.com/5015204/harvey-weinstein-scandal/>

4 For an example of the political potential of the relational aspects of the mother/infant figuration in performance see my discussion of Zoo Indigo's Under the Covers (Senior 2016).

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