

# Book Reviews

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## **The Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing Project: A Phenomenology of Miscarriage**

Jennifer Scuro  
Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017

REVIEWED BY DANIELA JAUK

I was immediately drawn to this book as the promise of disentanglement of the phenomenon of pregnancy from the phenomenon of childbearing (as expressed in the ≠ [does-not-equal] in the title) seemed new and important. In her experimental feminist phenomenological project, Scuro takes miscarriage as entry point to write against the neoliberal expectation of results that is mirrored in the trope of productive pregnancies. She also “attempt[s] to deinternalize the shame and grief of a compartmentalized and suppressed memory” (xi), and aims at making space for solidarity between “the woman who has miscarried, as she might recognize herself in the woman who has aborted her pregnancy, and again each with the woman who has “successfully” given birth” (xiv). In my opinion, Scuro has brilliantly kept her promises and her book is a powerful statement against the isolation and nation of women\* with postpartum experiences.

The book is divided in four parts. The longest, first part, is titled “Miscarriage or Abortion? (Or, #shoutingmyabortion in a Graphic Novel)” and is an impressive and very personal narrative in 175 images. She reveals that she

spontaneously miscarried her first pregnancy at week six. She gave birth to a daughter subsequently, and got pregnant shortly after this birth. What followed was a pregnancy that proved very difficult, with excessive bleeding and many weeks of bed rest. It had to be terminated half way through, in order to save the author's life. Scuro is guiding us through this challenging journey with much honesty, intimacy, and also humor at times. She has created an artful visual narrative that takes the form of collages as photocopies and photographs are incorporated in her compelling drawings.

Teary-eyed I follow how she is sitting in a recovery chair, and a woman is sitting beside her sharing that she was almost seven weeks pregnant and really can't have a baby right now. Scuro feels an amazing solidarity with this woman in this moment. The fact that this woman did not want her pregnancy, while she herself had wanted it, did not make them all that different. Both needed to be where they are, in the recovery chairs after "abortions." Scuro's point is to highlight an underdeveloped point of solidarity among women, as pregnancy is always temporal and substantial. Once pregnant, all women will find themselves postpartum, whether or not a child is born. Only a few pages later she is hustled by a pro-life activist as she tries to reach her car with her husband, in pain, and bleeding. What follows is a painful process of grieving, of bodily recovery, of trying to parent an infant and "function" as a person, and an academic, in the aftermath of the bodily experience of pregnancy ≠ child-bearing, as well as trying to re-construct partnership and meeting a partner again emotionally.

Part II takes two personal experiences as entry point to philosophical theory. Scuro shares how (while she is laying on the operating table after a C-section) doctors were joking around, and how at a philosophical conference a (male) attendee discounted the relevance of miscarriage for philosophy. Synthesizing several authors who theorized pregnancy she pushes back against dominant assertions of "what counts." With her visual narrative as philosophical allegory contextualized by critical theory, she provides material to free the condition of pregnancy from childbearing ideologies. In doing so she creates a powerful argument against neoliberal ideology invading pregnant bodies. That kind of neoliberalism that demands us to produce results, and to get over it quickly if we don't, and that leaves mothers feeling as failures for having survived "unsuccessful" pregnancies.

Part III is a phenomenological reading of miscarriage and a powerful argument against what she calls childbearing teleology (the idea of the end goal of pregnancy being able to bear a child) exercised through a medical and cultural complex of instruction and guidance for pregnant bodies. In this perspective, miscarriage is read as a failure, a non-event. In every case the loss that occurs at the end of each pregnancy is grounds for solidarity no matter the pregnan-

cy outcome. Scuro links a healthy full-term pregnancy with the possibility of miscarriage and concludes that all pregnancy participates in some kind of postpartum experience. She makes a strong argument here against (pro-) life-oriented interpretations for pregnant embodiment which suffocates the possibility of meaning for miscarriage and enables its silencing. She summarizes that a) there is a lack of scientific study related to causes and effects of miscarriage, b) there is a lack of ritual for miscarriage, and c) this challenges the “sociopolitical discourse on “life” as it belongs to a baby or fetus equal or greater to she-who-is-pregnant is a formulation of value that silences and sabotages women.” (216).

In the brief Part IV, Scuro addresses griefwork and “how to get over what you cannot get over.” Her goal here is to politicize griefwork and situate her own story in the larger project of making space for societal griefwork, as well as to share the burden of grief –independent from childbearing! – among those who have been pregnant. Making space for grieving the postpartum experience means to expose the intersection of misogyny, racism and ableism, that renders women’s lives and experiences invisible more effectively and define our shame and blame culture. Instead, Scuro calls for an understanding that all pregnancies end with expellation (which is a feminist ethicoexistential defense for griefwork), and that griefwork is neither women’s work, nor should there be there a moral demand to “move on.”

Scuro skillfully connects the personal experience of miscarriage with the macro-economic system and contemporary discourses on reproductive rights. She substantiates in very accessible ways her idea that pro-life, ableist, and neoliberal ideologies enhance each other with the expectation of birth as result of pregnant embodiment. This erases the experience of miscarriage and undermines the solidarity that arises out of the possibility of death and the postpartum experience that belongs to every pregnancy. Scuro is well aware of her “cis-white-het” subjectivity (and starts her graphic novel with this contextualization), yet does not specifically mention experiences of transgender parenthood in her theoretical explorations. We might add that solidarity may well stretch to include pregnant persons who do not identify as women (thus my \* in the first paragraph of this review in women\*).

In conclusion, I recommend the book for everyone. It is particularly attractive for teaching, as Scuro runs a Facebook site <https://www.facebook.com/pregnancydoesnotequal/>, on which she posts articles, news clippings and other material related to the book and opens a space for interaction. As a scholar, teacher, and cis-woman who shares the experience of (aborted, miscarried, and healthy) pregnancies, I have gained insight, inspiration and joy from this work personally and academically.