America, “Fat,” the Fetus

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1. Pregnancy/Citizenship

A man humiliates himself in front of his wife’s family; his wife, visibly pregnant and visibly tired of her husband’s greedy sentimental spectacle, retreats to the bedroom of her youth, strips down to the underwear of her maternity, and watches Super-8 films on the wall, home movies of her own childhood. The husband comes to seek forgiveness. Seeing that the wife wants not to see him, he interrupts the consolation of her cinematic memory by stepping into the filmic image itself, forcing the projector beam to shoot images of the wife’s childhood family onto his crisp, white shirt. There, he demands the wife’s forgiveness in the light of this second, now private, trespass on her family fantasy. Seeing that this intervention also alienates her, the husband flips around the projector, and aims these images of the wife as a playing child at her own pregnant belly. In this act, the couple comes together, rapturously watching her pregnant belly, which now serves as a screen for the family pictures. She points at herself on her
belly: “this is me”; she points at her sister and her father, loving her memory of their free play; she seems like the child on the belly and like the mother of the family she remembers; then, the images on the belly suddenly go blank and the couple reenters the present tense of the pregnancy. They merge oceanically in the fantasy that their child will be a boy as beautiful as the home movie images they’ve seen, whose spatial simultaneity on the wife’s body seems almost to call him forth. In the next scene, she gives birth to a girl. The husband dies of heart failure soon after, one day on a frozen pond.

This scene, from the 1990 film Once Around, plays on the contemporary national and mass cultural fixation on turning women into children and babies into persons through the media of photography and cinema. Against her will, the woman’s body becomes a screen for projections of maternal plenitude; against her will, the distance collapses between herself as a child and herself as spectator of her own lost embodied dignity. Her pregnant belly is the screen of unmediation that collapses these extremes. Meanwhile, the matte technique that neutralizes the belly’s roundness, such that it seems not to distort the familial images made for projection onto a flat wall, provides an image of cinema that affirms its mastery over the scene of reproduction. It is as though the pregnant body, opened up to the cinematic gaze, would reveal a developing roll of film, or a video monitor displaying an endless loop of floating fetal images. It is as though the three-dimensionality of the female body were itself a special effect, exposed as such by the presence of the fetus, which flattens out whatever corporeal excess the pregnant body shows.

Once a transgressive revelation of a woman’s sacred and shameful carnality, the pictorial display of pregnancy is now an eroticized norm in American public culture. And although Once Around dramatizes a struggle between two immigrant families over the question of whose “ethnic” style will survive in modern metropolitan America, its reliance on maternity to secure properly familial norms of intimacy and continuity makes the bodies in it national in a way that has only tangentially to do with the problem of assimilation that riddles its sentimental narrative. The wife’s silence as she watches the images of herself on the wall of her childhood bedroom marks a space of a longing narrative that does not yet exist, except as nostalgia,

for her or for American women. This narrative would provide an account of how what we might call “fetal motherhood,” in which the mother follows the condition of the fetus, has taken over the representational space of public dignity and value that used to be reserved as a utopian promise for women.

For so long, and apart from whatever changes in rights status American women have achieved, this promise of maternal value has marked an irreducible scene of what could be imagined as “woman’s power.” To demonstrate the stark scale of the inversion of value that constitutes the scene of fetal motherhood, we might begin at another prior negation of it: the slave mother’s absolute power to determine the meaning and status of her child. To “follow the condition of the mother” was the slave child’s legal and experiential condition in antebellum America. By focusing solely on the maternal context, the often violently biracial genealogy of slave children was occluded, made non-knowledge, and circumvented the law’s gaze. This maternal line of entitlement without entitlement set up the horizon of the slave child’s relation to embodiment—that is, to futurity, identity, and political self-sovereignty. To name fetal motherhood following this juridical and cultural logic marks a similar delegitimation of agency, history, and identity for the reproducing woman. In this context, the pregnant woman becomes the child to the fetus, becoming more minor and less politically represented than the fetus, which is in turn more privileged by law, paternity, and other less institutional family strategies of contemporary American culture.

The wife in *Once Around* is caught between traditional rubrics of identity and an experience of a difference from herself that finds no home in any discursive field, whether domestic, ethnic, regional, or national. Her pregnant body’s utility as an index of heritage, assimilation, estrangement, and change is similarly unpredicted by the available discourses of “identity” in cultural studies or American culture at large. Yet, her body bears the burden of keeping these gendered, racial, class, ethnic, and national identities stable and intelligible. Pregnant and estranged from herself, the wife in *Once Around* is nonetheless an identity machine for others, producing children in the name of the future, in service to a national culture industry whose explicit ideology of natural personhood she is also helping to generate. It is no wonder that her pregnant silence, released into narrative, would express a desire for what she calls an “adventure” of self-understanding, an adventure she can yet barely imagine with the lexicon she has that provides her conception of change.

This essay is not about maternity. It seeks to establish pregnancy as a condition distinct from the narrative that so often and so powerfully
governs the ways women who reproduce are thought about, a narrative in which the pregnant woman is cast in advance as already a mother embarked on a life trajectory of mothering. I mean to take on the pregnant woman's multidimensional form—its fat, its femaleness, its fetus—to explicate its status as a national stereotype and as a vehicle for the production of national culture. As a stereotype, it condenses and camouflages many forms of utopian cultural investment and many critical relations of violence and displacement. The national culture of the maternal stereotype is the focus of section two. Section three takes the pregnant body in quotidian space as the matter of its investigation of corporeality, public identity, pregnancy, and change. I will also argue, in sections four through six, that the competition, of which pregnancy is the scene, between the fetus and the mother, signals another kind of crisis of reproduction, specifically of the political norms that rely on mass-mediated representations of citizenship—of policy, publicity, and intimacy—in contemporary American culture. My main texts will be Raymond Carver’s “Fat,” Life magazine’s Lennart Nilsson photos of the beginnings of life, the pro-life videos The Silent Scream, Eclipse of Reason, and Let Me Live, and the films Look Who’s Talking and Look Who’s Talking, Too. These texts, in four different genres—postmodern minimalist literature, popular print media, political propaganda, and celebrity entertainment—all circulate narratives of change around representations of the polar embodiments of reproduction: pregnancy and fetality, or fetuses. The scale of the changes in norms of body, voice, and identity that the texts represent through the pregnant-fetal image suggests some major changes that are happening in the juridical and cultural logics of American personhood. I will argue throughout that the convergence of mass culture and mass nationality has profoundly unsettled the traditional privacy protections of the privileged national body, generating an image of citizenship as a kind of iconic superpersonhood, of which the fetus is the most perfect unbroken example.

But more than mass culture has changed the means of identity production. I have suggested elsewhere some senses in which, in America, bodies in public have embodied and organized the polar ends of political hierarchy. In mass-mediated and quotidian public spheres, to have had a

remarkable American body has meant that a person has become magical and iconic, perhaps in an auspicious way, as for a powerful queen or a president, perhaps in a devastating way, as when a formerly private person is touched by scandal and becomes game for bodily distortion as a form of symbolic humiliation. But not just scandal brings the body into a scene of painful corporeal identity. Every day, in ordinary, banal ways, members of the politically distressed populations of the United States—for example women, queer people, people of color, and the indecorous of any, especially lower, class—get humiliatingly named and reduced to their stereotypic embodiment during moments of distraction or preoccupation. This might involve a direct interpellation, while walking quietly on the street, or working steadily at a job; or it might be more indirect and impersonal, as when something random on television happens to remind you that the stereotype that gives you meaning in the public sphere is a despised one. The emergence of fetality has retraumatized a set of already vulnerable bodies: the body of the woman unsettled by pregnancy and already exposed to misogyny and the state; the impoverished, the young, the often African American or Native American women who have had little access to reproductive health support apart from a scandalous history of state chic-anery with regard to contraception; the fetus vulnerable to law and to abortion; pregnant women and fetuses alike, forced to register ideological contestations over what comprises “the good life” in America. But the culture of national fetality also newly touches the previously privileged—because unmarked—unexceptional citizen, who identifies often, but not always, as straight, white, male, and middle-class. His new exposure to


mass-mediated identity politics makes him experience himself as suddenly embodied and therefore vulnerable. An entire culture can come to identify with, and as, a fetus. In these ways, Americans generally are now in a transformative moment in the "optical unconscious" of national citizenship. The pregnant woman and the fetus thus register changes in the social meanings of gender and maternity; as they meet up in national culture, they also raise questions about intimacies, identities, politics, pictures, and public spheres.

2. It's Morning (Sickness) in America

The conditions of American citizenship are always changing. But these transformations of pregnancy and fetality have had extreme cultural effects. The emergence of fetal personhood as a legal and medical category, and as a site of cultural fantasy, has been a major stimulus for thinking anew about what citizenship means as an identity category and what it implies for the theory and practice of national identity. These changes have happened in a number of domains, and the combined effects of these changes have created a crisis, the responsibility for which pregnant women and their fetuses are bearing the burden.

How to explain the concentration of complex citizenship issues on the fate and status of a bare minimum unit of human material? Let us start at a beginning. By merging the American counterdiscourse of minority rights with a revitalized Providential nationalist rhetoric, the pro-life movement has composed a magical and horrifying spectacle of amazing vulnerability: the unprotected person, the citizen without a country or a future, the fetus unjustly imprisoned in its mother's hostile gulag. This movement has fundamentally altered the aggregate meaning of nature, identity, and the body in the construction of American nationality. Its transformations are of a scale unmatched in American history since the enfranchisement of African Americans in 1868, which not only added a new group of "persons" to "the people" but had two other effects relevant to this investigation: it changed fundamentally the relative meanings and rules of federal and state citizenship, and it called into crisis the norms and principles of national embodiment. Clearly, however, unlike the African American subject, the fetus has no au-

tonomous body. And unlike the African American subject, the fetus has no voice and thus cannot partake of the kinds of agency recognized in the protocols of the political public sphere. The success of the concept of fetal personhood depends on establishing a mode of “representation” that merges the word’s political and aesthetic senses, imputing a voice, a consciousness, and a self-identity to the fetus that can neither speak its name nor vote. This strategy of non-diegetic voicing has two goals: (1) to establish the autonomy of the fetal individual; and paradoxically, (2) to show that the fetus is a contingent being, dependent on the capacity of Americans to hear as citizens its cries as a citizen for dignity of the body, its complaints at national injustice.

Most Anglo-American feminist work on the politics of fetal personhood has focused on its theft of the meaning of gender, maternity, and childbirth from women. Rosalind Petchesky, Paula Treichler, Faye Ginsburg, Emily Martin, Rayna Rapp, Zillah Eisenstein, Barbara Duden, Marilyn Strathern, and many others have performed critical analyses crucial to this one.\(^7\) They have explicated profoundly the ways in which new technologies and new modes of representation, such as fetal imaging, have created a

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nationwide competition between the mother and the fetus that the fetus, framed as a helpless, choiceless victim, will always lose—at least without the installation of surrogate legal and technological systems to substitute for the mother’s dangerous body and fallen will. And they collectively have established a powerful argument for redefining the conditions of gendered identity in America according to the difference that the capacity to reproduce makes in the woman’s access to sociality, power, and value.

In addition to witnessing the politics of woman’s discipline to the norms of proper motherhood, it is important to recount this moment as a case study in the process of nation-formation and its reliance on manipulations of the identity form to occlude the centrality of reproduction to the processes by which the nation rejuvenates itself.8 In this light, the pregnant woman is the main legitimate space in which the category female converts into a national category and changes the meaning of citizenship—not just citizenship as a juridical category but also as a horizon of social practice and aspiration.

One reason the revitalization of this category is so crucial now is that pro-life rhetoric has seen the relation between nature and nation as central to its sacred logics. Citizenship is the category in which these two formations are supposed to merge, but the arguments for their relation differ in different contexts. First, the narrative of natural development from gendered womanhood to pregnancy and motherhood has provided one of the few transformational lexicons of the body and identity we have. It has framed womanhood in a natural narrative movement of the body, starting at the moment a child is sexed female and moving to her inscription in public heterosexuality, her ascension to reproduction, and her commitment to performing the abstract values of instrumental empathy and service that have characterized norms of female fulfillment. Some antifeminist anti-abortion activists view the modern woman as no longer trained in or committed to the rigors of natural femininity; pregnancy appears not only to threaten a

rupture in a traditional notion of the continuity between feminine value and motherhood but threatens the national future as well.

Anxieties around the relation between proper womanhood and proper motherhood have long been evident in middle-class-identified women’s reform movements. In so recasting the pregnant body as, at its best, a vehicle for the state’s “compelling interest” in its citizens, the pro-life nation that currently exists sanctions the pregnant woman as American only insofar as she becomes impersonal and public, committed to submitting her agency to the “compelling interests” of any number of higher powers. She is juridically and morally compelled to exchange the privacy protections of gender for a kinder, gentler state. Claudia Koonz has documented a similar conversion of gender to nationality in the conscription of German women to reproduce citizens for the Third Reich. At this time in America, however, the reproducing woman is no longer cast as a potentially productive citizen, except insofar as she procreates: her capacity for other kinds of creative agency has become an obstacle to national reproduction.

This is the logic by which the pregnant woman sutures femininity, nature, and nation. The emergence of pregnancy into ordinary representation makes this suture vulnerable to unraveling, and as it threatens to do so, so many of the hard-won political transformations in notions of women's authority over reproduction have unraveled as well. But if one effect of the discourse on fetal personhood is a crisis in the capacity of a maternalized gender to organize a discursive field that links women’s private activity to national history and the future, from the point of view of fetality, counter-claims for female authority over the fetus seem to block or distort the narrative of natural development. Thus, in pro-life discourse, the aim of national reproduction merges with the claim that fetuses, like all persons, ought to have a politically protected right to natural development. This version of the “costructuration” of nature and nation is behind the pro-life appropriation of tactics from feminist and other minority-American “identity” movements: asserting that the “silence” and “invisibility” of the fetal person will be redressed by its imputed speech and visibility; assuming the point of view of victimized citizenship by redefining radically the meaning, the history, and the dimensionality of the body; challenging and transforming stereotypes that define identity in the public sphere, emphasizing the claim to the

pure protection of the identity form that American national membership is supposed to provide.

The movement for fetal rights is thus also a development in the history of national sentimentality, where complex political conditions are reduced or refined into the discourses of dignity and of the authority of feeling. It suggests strongly that the subject position of the national victim, the "minority subject," has become a cultural dominant in America: in this moment of mass nationality and global politics, power appears always to be elsewhere, and political authenticity depends on the individual's humiliating exile from somebody else's norm. A nationwide estrangement from an imagined hegemonic center seems now to dignify every citizen's complaint.

As the ways in which norms of representing privilege in the political public sphere shift, such that people seek minority status in order to trump other forms of national demand; as the mass media produces further transformations of the scale of political experience in America; as pro-life and aligned forces incite the law to renaturalize national identity; and as everyone seems to experience nationality as a species of trauma, it seems necessary to rethink relations between identity and embodiment in the national public sphere. My aim is to be able to understand slogans such as "Support Our Future Troops!"

What kinds of anxiety and theory of personhood are expressed by such a slogan? How can we make sense of recent alliances between imperialism and pro-life patriotism, or between anti-choice, pro-natalist, anti-drug propagandas and pedagogy, which have produced collectively the anti-madonna, the mother who poisons or aborts her child, as a new traumatized national icon? To understand how the pregnant woman and the fetus have become so broken up and fetishized, both in their fracture and in the fantasy of their reunification, we must think about how national norms of corporeality work, and about the nation-making function of the minority stereotype. This critical project would not be possible without the unsettling redescriptive efforts of postcolonial and sex-radical intellectual activists—for example, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "What Is a Minor Literature?," Gayatri Spivak's work with Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi," "Breast-Giver," and "Douloti the beautiful," Eve Sedgwick's Epistemology, and Gayle Rubin's epistemologically rigorous activism against sexual taxonomies that dominate identity in the United States.11 Situated in very different national and

11. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "What is a Minor Literature?" in Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: MIT
international struggles for cultural and political legitimation, this work imagines ways of using a culture’s caste-making gestures toward the body to produce resistance and interference. Minority identity is often experienced as corporeal discomfort: the mouth, the anus, the cancerous breast, and “perverted” sex, for example, not only serve as evidence of the places where cultures install symbolic truths on the body at the expense of the subject’s dignity and authority but also serve as inspiration that a radical counteruse of metonymy might be executed to turn dominant cultures from imperial into contingent—even phantasmatic—entities, into totalities lost in the shadow of the resistant, the perverse, the self-destructive member.12

When the meaning of a person is reduced to a body part, the identity fragment figures as a sign of incomplete personhood; its dialectical other, the stereotype, masks this violence in images of self-unity, of the body’s natural adequacy to the identity that names it violently. Homi Bhabha has argued that the stereotype is an essential mental ligament of modern national culture, as the common possession of aesthetic and discursive “national” objects provides an affective intimacy among citizens that no commonly memorized political genealogy or mass experience of democracy has yet successfully effected.13 I have called the archive of these hieroglyphic images the “National Symbolic,” and have suggested that the collective possession of its official texts—the flag, Uncle Sam, Mount Rushmore, the Pledge of Allegiance, even now, perhaps, JFK and Dr. Martin Luther King—creates a national “public” that constantly repudiates political knowledge where it exceeds performatively mythic national codes.14

But the colonial spectacle or national stereotype serves more than


12. See also Laura Kipnis, “The Phantom Twitchings of an Amputated Limb: Colonialism as a Female Disease,” in Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 196–206.


to create national amnesia. Bhabha provides a “positive” explanation of the stereotype’s ambivalent function in mass cultural politics. To repeat and to elaborate on his argument: The colonial spectacle or the national stereotype is a hybrid form, a form of feeling, of alienation and of sociality. The stereotype circulates between subjects who have power as a kind of cultural property they control; it circulates among minority subjects as a site of masochistic identification (the minority/colonial subject as cultural property recognizes itself in the objective circulation of its own form); it is additionally a site of social power, of apparent magical embodiment, and of collective authority. When the national hieroglyph is an object, its capacity to condense and displace cultural stress is made possible by its muteness as a thing. But when the national stereotype represents a “minority” person, the ambivalences of the culture that circulates the form are brought to the fore, for the national minority stereotype makes exceptional the very person whose marginality, whose individual experience of collective cultural discrimination or difference, is the motive for his/her circulation as a collective icon in the first place. This is how it happens, for example, that a homophobic culture loves its Liberace, and a racist culture its Eddie Murphy. In moments of intensified racism, homophobia, misogyny, and phobias about poverty, these “positive” icons of national minority represent both the minimum and the maximum of what the dominating cultures will sanction for circulation, exchange, and consumption. As iconic minority subjects, they prove the potentialities of the marginal mass population to the hegemonic public; as minority exceptions, they represent heroic autonomy from their very identity; as “impersonations” of stereotyped minority identity, they embody the very ordinary conditions of subjective distortion that characterize marginality.

Because it appears to be personhood in its natural completeness, prior to the fractures of history and identity, the fetus is supposed to be a solution, from the origin of human existence, to the corporeal violence that plagues America today. It has become an index of natural/national rights with respect to which adult citizens must derive their legitimation. Thomas Laqueur has shown brilliantly how manipulations of scale function to consolidate “sex” as an identity category, a hieroglyph of unbroken development; I want to suggest how shifts of scale function, in mass national culture, to reroute social access to the body and to the body politic.15 Let

me begin again, not by tracing the trajectory of the fetus but by looking at its intimate opposite, the pregnant woman's body. The changing social dimensionality of the new pregnant hybrid American form will enable us to think pregnancy itself not as a scene for the production of children, nature, or the future, but as a scene for the production of the adult, its forms and norms of intelligible life.

3. What to Eat When You're Expecting: FAT

“My life is going to change. I feel it.”
—Raymond Carver, “Fat”

The woman who says this is a literary character, the unnamed narrator of Raymond Carver's story, “Fat.” She displays, in this, the story’s closing line, a remarkable union of knowledge and affect. She says that she can prophesy the future in the present, because she knows her feelings are true. How did she manage this respect for her feelings? The short answer is, she met a fat man. The fat man, through no direct agency of his own, changes her life by changing her relation to her body, her work, her domestic life, her sexuality, fantasy, and narrative. That is to say, he changes her mentally. He makes her think and fantasize about change. Yet, she does not know in the abstract what the story she tells (to her uncomprehending friend Rita) means. She seems to sense that telling it, even telling it badly, might establish for her a point of view from which she will see the horizons of her own imminent self-expression. In other words, she tells the story to gain a space of happy estrangement from her self-identity, her given lexicon. To gain a space, or to be one? The aspiration to represent, imagine, and experience the condition of postidentity is indeed the meat of “Fat.” I indulge myself here in a thick description of it.

In “Fat,” two persons frustrated in their bodies meet and serve each other. We might call these persons “the fat man” and “the heterosexual woman,” for these are the public, embodied identities that mobilize their crises in the text, and indeed their anonymity both to each other and to the reader would suggest that their embodied exemplarity is the point of their characterization. For instance, when the fat man enters the restaurant where the narrator works as a waitress, he provides a startling “semiotic

substance” for the workers there.17 Just as they turn items of raw food into intelligibly cooked dishes, they bring him, through offscreen gossip, from mere anonymity to specific generic anonymity: “This fat man was the fattest person I have ever seen” (1); “Who’s your fat friend? He’s really a fatty” (2); “God, he’s fat!” (3); “How is old tub-of-guts doing?” (4); “Harriet says you got a fat man from the circus out there” (5); “Sounds to me like she’s sweet on fat-stuff” (5); “Some fatty” (5). In addition to this naming frenzy, the fat man’s presence provokes a childhood memory for Rudy, the restaurant’s cook and the narrator’s lover:

“I knew a fat guy once, a couple of fat guys, really fat guys, when I was a kid. They were tubbies, my God. I don’t remember their names. Fat, that’s the only name this one kid had. We called him Fat, the kid who lived next door to me. He was a neighbor. The other kid came along later. His name was Wobbly. Everybody called him Wobbly except the teachers. Wobbly and Fat. Wish I had their pictures.” (6)

In contrast to the fat man’s impassive incitement of interpretation, the waitress who narrates the story is embroiled in a fable of penetration, in a heterosexual story that marks for her all personal spaces, public and private. I mean this in contrast to reading the story as a context in which gender identity dominates as a source for understanding the narrator: for the network of gossip, teasing, commentary, and metacommentary she coordinates within the restaurant culture suggests that her function in the space is to produce an occasion for heterosexual, not “feminine,” discourse. In addition to the restaurant, the waitress occupies two other places: her home, which she shares with her lover Rudy, and her girlfriend Rita’s house, where she tells her friend about the complex event condensed in the fat man’s appearance, and where her transition from the narrative of heterosexuality seems most likely to happen. Each of these places, marked by the centrality of kitchens and food to casual intimacy, takes on a form of the family function and displaces it into a public space. In each of these spaces, the waitress’s relation to the cook, Rudy, is saturated with their domestic sexuality. She describes every friend she has in the restaurant in some proximity to her domestic life: Margo is “the one who chases Rudy”; another worker, Joanne, elicits Rudy’s “jealousy” at her attention to the fat

man. She goes home and, after serving Rudy just as she has served the fat man, she has bored and alienated sex, as if the heterosexual narrative were, after all, inevitable; and it is clear, finally, that she and Rita are quite used to telling heterosexual narratives monotonously, in the ritual confidenc-
tialities of “girl-talk.” The waitress herself provides a banal object of erotic traffic for everyone’s commentary, just as the fat man provides an anerotic spectacle that elicits communication. It is in this transition from heterosexu-
ality to some other erotic formation that a story paradoxically about fat and fixity provides spectacles of transitional embodiment.

In the bowels of the restaurant, where erotic chatting and teasing distract the workers from the boredom and alienation of earning money, in the living rooms and kitchens of domestic spaces, and in the neighbor-
hood of childhood, where so many norms are fixed, fat excites. It elicits fresh interpretation, it permits direct commentary on the embarrassment of public embodiment, it allows conjecture about desire, it brings perversity and compulsion into an unthreatening realm of conversational play. Fat is so powerful and so social that it overwhelms the proper name of the person, whose fat takes over the space where personality usually resides.18 Appropriately, Carver stores these experiences of postindividuality in the story’s own name, “Fat,” which refers not obviously to a person, but to the substance. Like a proper name, fat is always fundamentally a thing, a thing of excess. But as a thing that denotes an unquantified substance, its very fixity accrues to itself more stability of identity than one might have imag-
ined. (This aura of phantasmatic stability is what, I gather, distinguishes
the person named Fat from his friend, the person named Wobbly, about whom we can know very little from this story and whose name thus also describes the condition of our knowledge about him. I would feel on shaky ground hazarding an opinion about Wobbly, while I feel I can grasp Fat.) It is the function of fat personhood here to signify the problem of descriptive adequacy under a regime of stereotypicality, which is also the problem of “identity” that proper names elide by their very banality. In contrast, the waitress, whose encounter with the fat man leads to her attempt at narra-
tive, sees in him a body of knowledge, an opportunity for a kind of magical thinking about corporeality, sensation, scale, and change.

Like her colleagues, the waitress who serves this customer is excited by the mass of man she sees. Her excitement derives, however, not from her own pleasure in reducing the immobilized Other to his essence or substance, nor from heterosexualizing him, but from the experience of visual amazement and conversational intimacy that this encounter occasions. She does not identify him but identifies with him, yet not in a mirroring way. For her bored friend Rita, she compulsively lists details of this man, his clothes, his “long, thick creamy fingers,” his “strange way of speaking” with its “little puffing sound[s]” and its shifting personal pronouns that shuttle between “I” and “we,” as in the sentence “I think we will begin with a Caesar salad” (1); the small waves of his hand and the slight squeaking shift of his sweaty, seated body (2, 3); his form so vast she interrupts her narrative to marvel at the memory: “Rita, he was big, I mean big”; “God, Rita, but those were fingers” (1, 2). In this short space of time, the waitress becomes addicted to the fat man. She hovers over him like a mother, or a lover, feeding him creamy, milky things, such as butter, sour cream, pudding, and ice cream. She is not thinking of her service as a symbolic act. She wants to think that she likes “to see a man eat and enjoy himself” (3), but when the fat man refuses her fantasy of his autocannibalistic pleasure (“I don’t know,’ he says. ‘I guess that’s what you’d call it.’” [3]), she realizes, “I know now I was after something. But I don’t know what” (4). She is not thinking about herself with any clarity at all, nor participating in the kinds of speculations I have been making about what motivates her identification with the fat man’s deliberate caloric and sensual excess. She has no evident capacity to interpret this encounter and to learn from her interpretation, which is why she retells it to Rita compulsively; and in this blockage, too, she is like the fat man, who admits his compulsion to rep/eat:

I put the Special in front of the fat man and a big bowl of vanilla ice cream with chocolate syrup to the side.

Thank you, he says.

You are very welcome, I say—and a feeling comes over me.
Believe it or not, he says, we have not always eaten like this.
Me, I eat and I eat, and I can’t gain, I say. I’d like to gain, I say.
No, he says. If we had our choice, no. But there is no choice. (5)

At its most intense moments, this story represents compulsion—not at first a compulsion to narrate but rather the experience of having compelled to live as a hieroglyph or stereotype, in a body that condenses a narrative whose form seems to assure the impossibility of choosing otherwise,
being something other than a fact, a social identity, a function in a system of conventions. For the waitress, this is a narrative of heterosexual identity; for the customer, it is the story of being, simply, fat. For her, it is a narrative about self-alienation and certain corporeal insufficiency; for him, it is a narrative in which the very compulsion to desire specific things (“Caesar salad,” “a bowl of soup with some extra bread and butter,” “lamb chops,” “[a]nd baked potato with sour cream” [1, 2]) forces him to risk insatiability, a constant inadequacy to one’s own desire. Finally, the waitress’s compulsion to occupy a position of instrumentality, service, and exchange—food in her mouth, penis in her vagina, food in her hand at the customer’s table—meets with the fat man’s need to be served, to work at remaining the object of someone’s verb. The two, in short, come together on these two experiential points: that of compulsion and that of the resignation that accompanies compulsion, which is born of the knowledge that under a regime of necessary identity, “choosing” one is a mere fantasy of agency, intention, and consciousness.

But if the first trillion occasions of “I eat and I eat” produce neither pain, gain, nor any other transformational material for the waitress, this encounter affixes to the compulsion to repeat a compulsion to think differently about change, to think about becoming historical. To become historical after being for so long and so deeply at best a living stereotype is to take on the project of acting in excess to the forms of distortion you normally inhabit. In this case, the waitress’s appropriation of her own capacity to produce such excess happens with all deliberate speed. When she leaves the fat man, she goes home with Rudy and appears to act in her usual way. “I put the water on to boil for tea and take a shower. . . . I pour the water in the pot, arrange the cups, the sugar bowl, carton of half and half, and take the tray in to Rudy” (5, 6). Silently, and at the same time, she has two transubstantiating fantasies. The first takes place while she prepares to serve Rudy his tea and his domestic milk product, half and half. As the water boils, “I put my hand on my middle and wonder what would happen if I had children and one of them turned out to look like that, so fat” (5). In the second fantasy the waitress describes relaxing to have sex with Rudy, “though it is against my will. But here is the thing. When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all” (6).

When the waitress tells these fantasies to Rita, neither woman “know[s] what to make of it” (6). The first fantasy takes place in the shower. She puts her hand on her “middle” and imagines not just an exceptionally
fat child, but *what would happen* if she had such a “fatty.” The child is un-gendered, just fat. Her hand is on her skinny belly, but still from that belly she imagines producing a child without her debility: infinite thinness. Such an event would force *something* to happen in her life; in any case, the fantasy itself represents a shift away from the heterosexual narratives that circulate among the bodies she knows. In this sense, the transposition of the fat customer to a fat fantasy child reproduces the action of thinking about change, about emigrating to a semiotic field outside of that in which she currently lives. Thus follows the second fantasy, in which Rudy becomes shockingly a “tiny thing,” while the waitress herself becomes terrific and terrifying in her fatness.

If the first dream vision relinquishes the intelligibility of history and the body through the fat child’s genderlessness, the second locates the waitress’s emancipatory agency in a different fantasy, of control over space, context, size. When Rudy gets on and occupies her, she tries to begin to relax. But she relaxes into a fantasy in which *her* fatness so overwhelms the space of Rudy’s person and the violation he enacts sexually that he becomes reduced to a “thing.” It is tempting to read this thing as a penis—after all, Rudy is so rudely reduced at the moment he transfers his own agency to his private part, so private it is invisible. It is also possible to transfer her fantasy of fat childbirth to this moment, such that the tiny thing Rudy is can be read as a homunculus, a baby, or a fetus. This either means she infantilizes him or that sexual intercourse injects his entire body into the waitress’s, such that she becomes big with Rudy, which is why she cannot see him.

But what the waitress says is that he is “hardly there at all” (6). He is no longer there as an adult lover. He has been reduced, condensed, and displaced into a bare minimum facticity. Fat, she imagines, usurps the place of heterosexuality; it supervenes the place of embodied exchange not through abstraction but through superembodiment; it casts the shadow of its belly on the sexo-semiotic of sexual difference, and eradicates a man in the process.19 It seems clear that the point of domestic entry to the narrator’s own body has been her vagina, not her mouth, as in the case of the fat man. But after serving the fat man, she understands: power as pleasure comes from speaking for two. For the fat man, speaking for two involves

becoming a supervalent site of autoerotic compulsion; for the heterosexual woman, speaking for two has meant speaking for the heterosexual couple that never quite achieves stability. But after the fat man, she sees another route to the power of superpersonality that speaking for two suggests: pregnancy. Her heterosexual fat will be less socially transgressive than the fat man's autoerotic corporeality, although as a pregnant woman, she will certainly take up a kind of excessive space that similarly elicits commentary and interpretation. For the person who speaks for two has no privacy. The person who takes on the model of fat agency is entirely public and yet also represents a mystical or magical interiority. More surface, more depth, more dimensionality: the fat subject has explicitly and paradoxically given up control and become a stereotype of compulsive, helpless choosing, of selflessness and an excess of self. The difference between the fat man's fat and the heterosexual woman's fantasy pregnancy is coded in the morality of their excess. His is an excess of consumption, he wears and performs his excess in public, and he does not pay for his display by making himself available for others' erotic fantasies. Thus, his fat trespasses.

In contrast, if the waitress's fantasies of superpersonhood are merely wishes for change, her fantasy of taking over space with fatness serves as an easily containable compensation for the inevitable heterosexual satiation of her everyday life; if, on the other hand, the waitress is really pregnant, she has taken control over the possibilities of change by blurring the boundaries between hers and another's body. Pregnancy, of course, expands her own corporeal horizon in a way her culture will support. But this seems not to be her motive for entering the state of becoming pregnant. This seems to be located in the rapture, the feeling of change she secures, which is an erotic feeling for which she has no social support and of which she herself has little understanding outside the improvisations of fantasy. Speaking for two creates a space for an expanded definition of personhood, and although it takes a maternalist fantasy to do it, the waitress, for the first time, feels authorized to think expansively, to make her body magical. This magical feeling is opposite to what she experiences at work. It releases her from the compulsion to "relax" while she is being violated against her will; it opens up what Eve Sedgwick calls a "space of permission" for the kind of change that will authorize her feeling for it.20 No longer constrained by the violations of sexuality and interpretation that characterize heterosexuality, the fat/fetus

axis ungendered the woman and releases her from identity and definition. As the waitress says to her inquisitive lover, “‘Rudy, he is fat . . . but that is not the whole story’” (5).

Taken as one woman’s impulsive solution to her conscription to heterosexual womanhood, “Fat” maps out how what looks like a cross-margin identification with another corporeally marked person can disrupt the authority of public norms and rules of erotic decorum. Another reading of the story might put a much more negative spin on it.\(^{21}\) Griselda Pollock argues that “any figured body is a complex of traces of fantasies of several bodies, bodies constantly oscillating between lack and plenitude, threat and restoration. The body of this scenario is the mother’s body, the repressed body, and the one that obsesses the phallocentric system.”\(^{22}\) From this vantage point, the waitress has just invented for herself conditions of phallocentric female signification that veer between overpresence and lack and that fix on the pregnant woman. But the issue here is not whether her sentimentality about fat and her fetal imaginary constitute true or false consciousness, rather to establish that distortions of scale that falsify or transfigure notions of natural form have become common routes to imagining fate and pain, on the one hand, and change and freedom, on the other.\(^{23}\) The narrator of this tale enacts a metadistortion of form, and in so doing inhabits a space of change and exchange that uses ordinary apertures of incorporation, the mouth and the vagina, to dissolve boundaries between public and private, capitalist and domestic, and all corporeally conscripted spaces of identity. To imagine freedom in the fantasy, not in the lived experience, of noncompulsory female fatness or pregnancy, and to imagine speaking for two is not simply to perform the ritual inversions of carnival but instead to seek in representation a space of change for which there is yet no reliable structural, let alone skeletal, support.

I mean this moving iconicity, this impossible flickering image, this structure of self-displacement into supercorporeal identity, to represent a utopian moment of subjective and corporeal excess in America. But the cost of this subjectification is an excessive focus on the isolate body as the totality of its own political condition. The narrator of “Fat” has great expectations. Although these are both personal and social, however, they are not construed as political in the text, because the conditions of identity and specificity have been so miniaturized and banalized in the world of this tale that the historical and knowledge contexts of the narrator’s life and change of life have been left entirely implicit. It is an effect of national power, among other things, to make implicit, to make a seeming property of the body, such disciplinary constructions of persons that their self-descriptions barely veer from the circulating library of the collective stereotype. Thus, the narrator’s solution is to displace herself physically in the scene of power while semiotically inhabiting it naïvely.

The other side of this screen can be viewed in the contexts in which the narrator imagines fetality to revolutionize her own ordinary possibilities for change in modern America. In 1965, the first photographic images of a wombed fetus were published in Life magazine. They were framed by Life as an American miracle in the realms of nature, of technology, and of domestic intimacy. These photos of origin, of natural development, and of “life” were repeated and renewed like wedding vows in Life in the summer of 1990. Human space and time have been entirely reconstructed through these “almost sacred” photographs; in addition, the fetus’s revolutionary embodiment has accompanied and incited fundamental alterations in the place of visual media in American political culture. In this light, the chapter in the story of postmodern American citizenship that fetal personhood occupies is also profoundly about how mass culture has spawned unpredictable events in mass nationality. The photography of Life magazine has coordinated the origins of human life with the snap of the shutter. This change in the time and space of human identity initiated an entirely new scopic regime, a whole new calendar, and finally, a whole new voice for the American citizen.

4. The “Fragmentation of the Aura”: Life Before Birth

On April 30, 1965, Life magazine’s cover story was titled “Drama of Life Before Birth,” featuring on the cover a “Living 18-week-old fetus shown
inside its amniotic sac.” This “[u]nprecedented photographic feat in color” was unprecedented, because the fetus was living at the time the “specially built super wide-angle lens and . . . tiny flash beam at the end of a surgical scope” (54) recorded its uterine existence; the rest of the pictures were taken of “surgically removed,” miscarried, or aborted fetuses outside of the womb and the maternal body. On Life’s cover, the fetus faces left and seems to look at the magazine’s name, which confirms its own “life”; Life, the magazine, confirms life before birth, designating as life anything that can be photographed and captioned in its pages. John Berger points out that the sacred and documentary function of Life was an explicit part of its inaugural machinery:

The first mass-media magazine was started in the United States in 1936. At least two things were prophetic about the launching of Life, the prophecies to be fully realized in the postwar television age. The new picture magazine was financed not by its sales, but by the advertising it carried. A third of its images were devoted to publicity. The second prophecy lay in its [ambiguous] title. It may mean that the pictures inside are about life. Yet it seems to promise more: that these pictures are life. The first photograph in the first number played on this ambiguity. It showed a newborn baby. The caption underneath read: “Life begins . . .”

This is to say that new regimes of textuality, of capital accumulation, of national discourse, of the family, and of human embodiment were unveiled as mutually reinforcing structures of value by Life, and more than simple pro-choice arguments are implied in such a conjunction of domains. In a magazine that conflates all documentation with nationality, celebrity, and intimacy, the baby circulates as the tabula rasa of consumer nationalism, as an object consumed and as a citizen recast. This formation consolidates the structure of agency in mass citizenship that, as Berger says, now dominates American politics.

We might not have predicted this specific change in 1965. In the three decades between the first and second installments of the fetal photographs, the meaning of this double movement between science and magic

has changed because of changes in political norms about personhood and political representation that these photographs themselves facilitated. Benjamin’s notion that the photograph emits both an aura of the real person and also the person’s death reminds us that the invasive installation of the camera in the womb ruptured a seemingly sacred or natural continuity between the mother and the fetus she carries. The mother remains involved with fetal nourishment, even under the new photographic regime. But prior to the new technology, the mother’s expanded body had functioned both as the representation of the fetus’s body, and as its armor. The expansion of the fetus to human and even superhuman scale within the frame of the photograph shattered the aura of maternal protection, making the fetus miraculous in a new way, vulnerable in a new way, and human in an unprecedented way.

Additionally, as E. Ann Kaplan, Petchesky, Martin, and Duden have shown, this transformation of representation and scale has pushed the mother into the fuzzy, unfocused part of the picture, throwing her body into a suspension of meaning and value with implications both intimate and national.26 At the time of this first series of pictures, however, the antimaternalist implications of fetal photographic viability were unclear; nonetheless, the captions to these “revolutionary” images do clearly transfer the agency of the mother in fetal development to three other objects—the camera, the placenta (which “[c]ontrary to popular belief, [produces] no direct connection whatever between the mother’s circulation and the baby’s” [71]), and the magazine, Life itself. Therefore, the uniqueness of the emplacement of the photographed fetus as the source of its realness is that the aura of death the photography captures is itself captured by a discourse on futurity, natural transformation, inevitability, Life/life.

The installation of this technology into the sacred and the political public sphere is made explicit in Life’s 1990 recelebration of what “life” means.27 Evidence is in the shift of the title: from “Drama of Life Before Birth” (1965) to “The First Pictures Ever of HOW LIFE BEGINS,” which is

supplemented inside by the religious title, “The FIRST DAYS of Creation” (26); evidence is also in the magazine’s editorial insertion of this now widely disseminated kind of image into its self-description as a national album of family photographs and in the captioning rhetoric of the text, which has become newly infused with universalizing sacred rhetoric about the family of MAN. Most explicit about the possibilities of this technological transformation of personhood, publicity, and knowledge is an interview with the photographer, Lennart Nilsson, himself. Here, the magazine raises the question of his power to be both God and the Supreme Court:

His greatest subject, and his continuing lifetime project, is based on the way he sees a mother’s womb—not as a social battleground but as a “very interesting” world in which a magical process occurs. Oh, he will try to please the questioners, aid in their own, more narrow investigation. Out of sheer civility he will flip once more through his pictures in search of the key moment, but again and again, he cannot choose. There is always another moment, earlier or later in the process, that he loves just as much. . . . “I cannot tell you. If I told you only ten days, or two days, or forty days, it would be wrong. It would. Look at the pictures. I am not the man who shall decide when human life started. I am a reporter, I am a photographer.” He smiles. “Maybe the first moment of human life, it starts with a kiss.” (46)

It is not only the centrality of photography to abortion discourse, which uses disgust at fetal tissue to mobilize protection of the tissue, whose violation by technology is at issue, but also the naturalization of heterosexuality in fetal description that links the construction of fetal personhood to the agency of desire: “The two batches of chromosomes draw inexorably toward one another, like lovers across a crowded room. . . . Perhaps the beginning of life is as complicated and seamless a miracle as falling in love” (46). Lennart Nilsson cannot “choose,” although he is the photographer; the fetus, too, cannot “choose,” for the “choice” to reproduce, infinitely repeated in the fantasy of fetal agency developed in these captions, has taken place in the kiss, which must properly lead down the slippery slope to the fetus, to Nilsson’s A Child is Born and Behold Man, with their color glossies of “life,” and to Life magazine, with its aspiration to construct a mass-mediated national family of consumers. These categorical changes extend from transformations in the represented body size of the fetus; they reinvent natural heterosexuality; they create new forms of knowledge, danger, and power; they evaporate the mother, who is now not “viable” outside of the couple.
Her technical irrelevancy to the child’s reproduction is a condition of political erasure, since all reproduction is now public, the condition under which fetuses and mothers vie for personhood in America.

5. The Silent Scream and the Physician’s Voice

Just as it is generally true that the deployment of visual knowledge about fetality has incited the culture to unlearn a variety of things it used to know about the complex relation of maternity, science, and the law, it is also the case that the pro-life movement has strikingly reframed public discourse on what it means to be American and on where the authority of nationality really adheres. In my discussion of *Life* and “Fat,” the nation has been a commercial sign, imminently or explicitly a scene of commodity exchange around the body, which was central to the production of national intimacy as a form of family feeling. *The Silent Scream, Eclipse of Reason*, and *Let Me Live* are not only visual lyrics about the right of bodies to “life” in the abstract; they are sophisticated remediations of the political public sphere. Although they speak a patriotic language, they place “politics” in places and in publics to estrange and to undermine the juridical nation. This ambivalence toward the nation is fundamental to the ideology of the New Right—for example, it is evident in Ronald Reagan’s 1984 *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation*, written while he was a sitting (or sleeping) president. In this essay, Reagan continues to position himself as an outsider to the official nation; citing the heroic precedents of Dred Scott and Abraham Lincoln (whose pictures join Mother Teresa’s as the iconic monuments of pro-life nationalism), Reagan demonstrates the crisis in his belief in the Providentially sanctified nation by making historical America a contested term, in competition with other forms of authority—with a specific genealogy of American heroism, global culture, science, morality, experience, and, of course, the abstraction “life” itself.

We can read the relation between fetality and nationality in each of these videos as an offspring of the image and caption relation Benjamin describes: in this kind of work, crucially, the main kind of caption is the voice-over.28 This means that the videos enact their reconstruction of identity by

28. This discussion of the politics of the voice-over in pro-life representations of fetal personhood was anticipated in Barbara Johnson’s analysis of abortion and the rhetorics of personhood: “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 184–99. See also the pro-life poem: “O’ Name-
coordinating different relations of displacement. First, their construction of visual knowledge relies heavily on a juxtaposition between totality (images of the whole fetus, the whole doctor, the whole family) and fragmentation (in montage sequences of broken up fetal bodies, abortion clinics, women in mourning, doctors shrouded in antiseptic white, and “pictures of agony” related to other social ills such as racism and homelessness that have already been legitimated as “American” problems in the political public sphere). In contrast to the internal dialectics of form, the voice-over both reconstructs authority by acting as a consoling guide to the new visually traumatized body and image archive and undermines the scene of any human authority, by multiplying the kinds of voices silenced under the regime of Roe versus Wade and by relying on the pseudo-objectivity of science to stop the violence of interpretation, which here becomes a form of will-to-power that denies the objective truth of the pro-life texts.

As an aggregate, the pro-life videos claim to resituate all of human history and American law from the perspective of the fetal body. This horizon of meaning is not, from the beginning, considered fully in terms of citizenship, but overall an argument develops that disestablishes the credentials of American liberalism and American politics, especially where they value autonomy and social experience over “life” in the body. Yet, the kind of postmodern liberation theology this movement has developed envelops the mass cultural icon as well, by appropriating the pseudo-intimacy of the relation between the star and the ordinary and generic individual.29 This relation between the value of the body itself and the fictive intimacy of individuals with media personalities produces new logics of meaning, value, and politics within hybrid generic forms: the videos fuse the anerotic sentimental structure of the infomercial and the docudrama with the pornotropic fanta-

29. See Denise Mann’s argument that television produces the “auratic decay” of the Hollywood star, who transforms the signifying conventions of intimacy and domesticity that the television situation comedy circulates by enfolding cinematic power into its everyday life simulacra and narratives. Mann argues that star aura miniaturized on television encouraged fantasy relationships between fans and stars, thereby distributing aura to the everyday life anxieties of the housewife represented in, consuming, and constructed in identification with the “situation” of the comedy. “Auratic decay” might very well be another version of the “banalization” I’ve been describing. See Denise Mann, “The Spectacularization of Everyday Life: Recycling Hollywood Stars and Fans in Early Television Variety Shows,” in Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television, ed. Jeremy G. Butler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 333–60.
sies of the snuff film. The purpose here is to exhaust the banality of violence to the ordinary (read white, “American”) body, to make violation once again a scandalous violence, and to reprivatize that body (within the patriarchally identified family); to recontain scandalous corporeality within mass culture and the minority populations of the nation; and to revitalize the national fantasy of abstract intimacy, but, this time, in a body that, visually available in its pure origin, receives protection from the juridical and immoral betrayals of national capitalism let loose by feminism and Roe versus Wade.

Let me briefly lay out the national contours in which the fetal image became not just captioned but spoken for, using the aforementioned videos as examples of the analogy that has become common between the fetus, the woman, and the nation. The Silent Scream is narrated by Dr. Bernard Nathanson, cofounder of the National Abortion Rights League (NARAL) and a self-described converted ex-abortionist. The video uses sonograms and implied fetal consciousness to democratize the expertise that will, he hopes, redefine American personhood. Eclipse of Reason, another Nathanson production, enlists the authority of television to place the fissure between the moral and the juridical nation in the context of both a global jeremiad and the authority of the Hollywood star system. Charlton Heston introduces Eclipse of Reason, lending his aura as Hollywood’s Moses and as public representative of the NRA to broadcast true patriotic antinomian credentials. Finally, Let Me Live projects as a postpolitical, utopian horizon the political aims of the pro-life movement. It is a fetal national anthem, narrated and sung by Pat Boone and “thousands, maybe millions” of fetuses.30 The video’s textual system can only be described as an anthromorphology, for it returns the fetus visually to its disembodied state and then, as it grows, reinvents human time, space, value, and subjectivity by giving it a collective and an individual voice, or, more particularly, a voice-over.

The Silent Scream premiered in 1984 in a media whirl of controversy around the authenticity of the “real time” abortion it shows. These debates were incited by the truth claims of the very first frames: Opening with a warning that explicit material will follow and with the credit line for “An American Portrait Film’s Educational Production,” the text then moves

to its first image, a sonogram. The triangular image of sonar waves is surrounded by nothing, a plain orange matte, and a voice saying, “Now we can discern the chilling silent scream on the face of this child, who is now facing imminent extinction.” The “now” repeated in this sentence refers to a number of coterminous temporalities: now, in the viewing of this film, now, in the history of science, now in the history of the world, and now in the magical time of textuality, where the repetition of the destruction of the fetus is always “imminent,” for this fetus is all fetuses—from the point of view of its standing in the law. The issues arising from the claim that a videotaped sonogram is “real time” are plain, but when The Silent Scream finally enters its narrative, it is the history of science that establishes its transformation of expertise. Nathanson opens the conversation autobiographically: “When I was a medical student in 1949, there was no science called fetology. We were taught that there was something in the uterus, but it really was an article of faith as to whether or not it was a human being and whether or not that human being had any unique qualities.” Since the 1970s, the science of fetology exploded with methods such as “ultrasound imaging, electronic fetal heart monitoring, hysteroscopy, radio immunochemistry, and a host of other dazzling technologies which today constitute, in fact, the corpus of the science of fetology. . . . Those technologies, those apparatuses, that we use every day have convinced us that the unborn child is indistinguishable in any way from us.” This is to say that “our” ordinary practice is already way ahead of our conceptualization of it.

As he tells this story, Nathanson speaks technically about what ultrasound is. He then names the instruments that the abortionist uses on the fetus; he uses plastic models of fetuses, larger than actual size, for purposes of demonstration, and then, switching from infomercial to docudrama format, crosscuts his representation of the abortion on the plastic baby, with the abortion viewed on real time ultrasound-wave images. In his play-by-play narration of the abortion in real time, each movement of the medical utensil, and each response of the fetus, is registered and interpreted; the apparent movement taking place inside, from the abortion, as shown on the monitor, and the simulated abortion happening outside, on the plastic baby, not only brings the violence closer to “you,” the consumer, who is asked to choose between identification with the baby or with the medical personnel, with their power, money, and jargon. Nathanson comments, indeed, that medical personnel who have watched this representation, as we have, have undergone conversion experiences (they report these experiences on film in Eclipse of Reason) and have left behind the practice of
abortion forever. This instance of technical and emotional pedagogy is followed by a series of arguments about the kind of context the United States provides for abortion. After giving the annual figures on American abortion, he associates, covertsly, the U.S. government with the Mafia, who apparently now runs profitable abortion clinics much as it ran gin mills during Prohibition, in an analogous evil, underground industry promoted by a bad federal law. This information segment is followed by one that repeats the structure of the voice intoning over the silently screaming sonogram; over pictures of silent crying women, victimized by abortion, Nathanson begins the nationalist argument: that this film should be a part of the law's standard of informed consent, and that "I refuse to believe that Americans, who have put men on the moon, can't devise a better solution than the resort to violence." At "moon," the image text moves to a picture of a man on the moon, and then to a fetus: and at the moment the film ends, an image of Mount Rushmore flashes on the screen, as if to remind us that (1) in nature, all presidents were fetuses; (2) presidents are vulnerable like fetuses; and (3) the monumentalizing memory of American political life should provide the kinds of guarantees of celebrity for each and every American, not just the ones whose futurity is secured by the privileges of the political public sphere. In sum, America follows the condition of the fetus. Thus, the typological construction of another abortion broadside: "Abortion is destroying America's future; one life at a time."

The aim of The Silent Scream is to establish "documentation" that will transform the decision to abort from an effect of feeling or desire to the rational effect of true knowledge. Nathanson insists that this objective, graphic information would simply exterminate the capacity to advocate abortion: technical information about the sensations that both the fetus and the mother will experience during the procedure will have to substitute for the shaky vicissitudes of desire or mystification. Since the woman would see in it that the fetus consents to nothing, no woman, in Nathanson's view, would knowingly consent to abortion. The woman who aborts must then be blinded by liberal ideology, which has neither medical expertise nor the theoretical capacity to understand the pain of human embodiment. The fetus, in contrast, feels the unmediated truth, and its condition thus must be considered the truth of human existence. While Nathanson acknowledges that pro-choice advocates argue correctly that the self-understanding of a pregnant woman ought to figure prominently in decisions about abortion, and that without that right to exercise her capacity, she would earn the credentials of the victim so central to the vision of pro-life doctrine, he down-
plays the woman's pain as merely a social problem, minimal in the face of "life," a.k.a. the fetus, itself.

If The Silent Scream uses the new reproductive technologies to reconstruct the identitarian logic of natural extension from fetus through science to national identity, Eclipse of Reason connects the new information technologies to a reconstructed global history to tell the story of abortion in America. This shift in focus from the conscience of the individual spectating consumer to the national mass-media public is coordinated with the much broader global consciousness of Eclipse, which sees the national crisis in terms of a moral, economic, and imperial world emergency. While the internal matter of the video repeats much of the same information and imaging that characterizes The Silent Scream, the narrative frame around Eclipse of Reason expresses the need for a political, mass-cultural consciousness to match the ethical and scientific claims made in the first instance. The frame is performed by Heston, here in its entirety:

There were over 150,000 open-heart operations performed in this country every year. Did you know that? Probably you did, or a good documentary’s about it on television all the time. We all know something about single- and double-bypass surgeries and how many lives have been saved, and that’s good. But the kind of surgery most frequently done in America is abortion, and that’s not meant to save lives. In this country, we perform and submit to one and one-half million abortions every year—that’s ten times the number of open-heart surgeries. Now, the average abortion only takes five or six minutes, but they’ve never shown a complete operation on any television channel, any time, and that’s not good. That’s a big part of what television is for, to explore public questions we care about. Abortion is surely that—the feelings generated, the passionate debates and the issues, safety, morality, long-term consequences. All these intrude on the public conscience much more strongly than any surgery ever has. Political candidates are not expected to take a stand on coronary bypass. The Supreme Court has yet to rule on the constitutionality of heart transplants. People don’t take to the streets in thousands to demonstrate their opinions on artificial hearts. Yet, the press and television tell us a lot more about heart surgery than they ever have about abortion. I think the media have failed here badly in what they claim is their responsibility to inform the public who will make the final decisions on abortion. If you’re looking at me on television now, then they’ve accepted that responsibility to inform.
The film you’re about to see is graphic. Some of you may find it too graphic: there’s blood, and death, we all remember the horror of the film from the death camps in Europe, the grisly images of the broken victims of Hiroshima, I was in Ethiopia myself—you’ll recall the gut-wrenching pictures of starving babies we sent back from there. Well, the babies in this film are not starving. But with those other terrible images, they serve the right of the people to know, to know the victim. When he accepted the Nobel Prize, Elie Wiesel said, “I swore never to be silent whenever or wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” No one has ever spoken more eloquently than that on behalf of the victim. Since 1973, abortion has claimed more than twenty million mute and innocent victims. This film speaks for them. The silence has to stop.

The broken body of the fetus hovers over this monologue like a ghost, but there is no fetal image here, just Heston. His masculine authority offers up the form of celebrity power as a sign of what all political agents must seize: since the media has failed to assume its obligation to inform us about the true state of the global/national body, each pro-life activist/consumer must in essence become Charlton Heston. What would this transformative identification mean? To refuse the false position of neutrality would be to seek and broadcast painful knowledge about the painful world, all over the land. It would be to think African/Jew/Fetus. It would be to remember important failures in America’s political leadership.

Heston’s segment is immediately followed by an announcement that “during the next eight minutes, this child will be destroyed before your eyes.” But even if the violence we witness in the video pains us, this is Armageddon, the violence to end all violence. For the terrible images of truth we see are the price we have to pay for a terrible political system, whose global, national, and local parameters are made graphic in the text with maps imprinted by statistics and with the transnationally exported photographs of pain, such as those Heston mentions from Ethiopia. To take on the star aura, the aura of supercitizenship, he tells us, we must assume custody of the fetal body, represent it like an actor or a politician. And to represent it politically is to caption it, to speak to it, around it, with it, for it.

The video itself is the usual encyclopedia of technical information: an aborted fetus in still and moving pictures; a real and a plastic demonstration; a sequence of national maps and statistics that join with both
technical and commonsense definitions of personhood to reconstruct expertise; a wide variety of ignorant responses by people on the street and by postabortion subjects experiencing trauma about abortion, whose deficiencies provide the historical necessity for the video’s promotion of a new and sacred Enlightenment, involving a knowledge revolution that will eclipse the eclipse of reason that abortion betokens. In the video’s final section, two montage sequences summarize the lesson. Nathanson introduces them to document “the unmistakable trademark of the irrational violence that has pervaded the twentieth century. There’s no rightful place for violence in a world of reason. Those qualities which grace such a world of light and reason are kindness, compassion, patience, and love. This is the face of the world of violence.” This speech is followed by a montage punctuated by music, with no voice-over: (1) aborted baby-mound on table; (2) protestor being bit by police dog; (3) Hiroshima; (4) Khaddafi; (5) needle/drug/arm; (6) “terrorist” in stocking cap throwing bomb; (7) the sign of a destroyed abortion clinic—“George R. Tiller, M.D., P.A., Women’s Health Care P.A.”; (8) two hooded Klansmen; (9) bag lady; (10) Ethiopian starving child. This trauma montage requires no voice-over, because the violence it represents is iconic: traumas made famous in the mediascape of everyday news and entertainment. The text holds out this chain of violence as a site of proliferation—there is no end in sight to its catalogue of destruction. But because the pro-life movement wants to return to a body bounded by ordinary, unspectacular dignity, the video offers another montage: (1) Mother Teresa holding a baby (over which it is announced, “This is the face of the world of love”); (2) man standing behind a wheelchair sharing laughter with a man in a chair; (3) two women hugging; (4) wedding picture; (5) mother and baby; (6) grandmother and young boy; (7) two women with two babies; (8) family portrait; (9) yawning baby and smiling mother; (10) little kids playing musical instruments.

“What kind of a world do you want?” is the last line of the video, meaning “Which montage are you in?” These images are thus the new sentimental icons of national culture, images of virtuous pain and evil power. These are the choices offered up for the future of personhood in America: In the first, pain is political, regulated by nations, racism, imperialism, and global capitalism; it is public, a terrified and terrorized world of/in black and white. The counterdiscursive pro-life field of pleasure is, in contrast, intimate, familial, corporeal, nonpenetrative, intergenerational, and historical only in the private sense, imbued with the sensuality of color. It promotes a relation among surfaces and suggests a world where the only means nec-
ecessary for survival is love and where all bodies have one “face.” For if love is your capital, a world that chooses it will beget no poverty, racism, or government. Pain proves victimization; victimization signals unjust power; the world of light will be achieved only when the body is safe for the future. This is what star power is, and here celluloid becomes the fantasy substance of the human body.

You will notice that fetal and pregnant bodies have practically evaporated from my own discussion of these pro-life videos. What I have been trying to describe here, indeed, is the process by which the fetus was produced, invested with aura and scandal, and then made banal—as its minor existence in the montage of national icons in Eclipse of Reason demonstrates. Let me summarize. When the fetus was an article of fantasy or faith, as in “Fat,” it was either indescribable or multiply describable. It provided a structure of improvisation, which opened a space for change beyond what the female narrator knew how to desire, much less depict. Her voice-over is thus partial and intuitive in its construction of ways bodies might be imagined acting in excess of themselves, to unleash new species of identity. When the fetus became available to photography, making “life” miraculous in a new way, it came to occupy a new scale of existence, often taking up an entire frame like a portrait. In the process of becoming bigger, it pushed the externally visible bodies involved in reproducing it outside of the family picture, making the mother and the father, I think, ancestors before their time.

As it became more in play as a political substance, the fetus’s iconicity became a nostalgic horizon. The narrative of fetal violation by bad mothers and unjust nations was visually confirmed by images that shuttled between the still, perfect stereotypicality of the fetal icon and the icon’s horrifying violation—by the nation, by persons, by forced historicity. The solution these texts offer is to reimagine America as a place where, paradoxically, the body is safe, but only as a stereotype. This is a political fantasy of the end of history, in a realm of postpolitics, beyond everyday life, maternity, racism, law, regulation; it is represented as a possibility for us by the hyperspace of mass culture, whose very commitment to pleasure produces a clean, well-lighted decontextualized celebrity.

The celebrity’s capacity to move through space unimpeded by obstacles in the mode of imperial being not only repossesses the constitutional ideal of abstract personhood but does it in a body. Thus, although this discourse remains maternalist and patriotic, it can only imagine the fetus, the mother, and the nation with one “face”; although it is a rhetoric suspicious
of the bodily pleasure and sexuality mass culture promises, it still sees in this displacement of the juridical to the simulated national culture a route to constructing new fantasy norms, not only of pleasure but of citizenship.


In short, your fetus is what you eat—and what you don’t eat. As you can probably guess, a baby made up of candy bars and colas is quite different from a baby made up of whole grain breads and milk. . . . Not a pretty picture. . . . While you can eat what you choose to eat, a fetus has no choice. It eats what you’ve chosen, whether the selection serves its nutritional interests or not. It can’t order in a bowl of shredded wheat to supplement your breakfast doughnut, or an extra serving of protein to augment that lunchtime hot dog. It can’t leave the fries if it’s surfeited with fat, or opt for a glass of milk instead of that cola when the craving is for calcium.

—Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi E. Murkoff, Sandee E. Hathaway, What to Eat When You’re Expecting

The celebrity fetus is among us now, starring in political documentaries, Hollywood films, commodity advertisements, and home videos.31 Like all celebrities, the identity its body coordinates exists fully in a public sphere of superpersonhood, where it radiates authenticity and elicits strong identification—in part by the miraculous “auratic” ways its own magnificent body can be represented and in part by its displacement from an authentic voice. For although the fetus may be a living thing, it is also, as a representation, always a special effect.32 This is a condition of extreme vulnerability and also of immense power, and its effects and authority go way beyond their narrative articulation. In this sense, the fetus follows the celebrity logic of the diva, whose majesty derives from her bigness on the screen, her intimacy with pain and death, her capacity to survive by being a space of permission

31. Along with the work on the cultures of fetal visualization cited in notes 7 and 26, Janelle Sue Taylor has recently written on fetal visualization, the commodity form, and the hybridity of the fetus’s traumatized/sacred body, which I have gathered under the rubric “banalization”: “The Public Fetus and the Family Car: From Abortion Politics to a Volvo Advertisement,” Public Culture 4, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 67–80.
for the expression and bodily demonstration of excess sentiment. The difference is that the diva has a voice, and it matches her body for bigness. The new reproductive media have attempted to disavow this difference in ways that have radically reframed how political identity is represented in a national context. This has to do with the refraction of the commodity form in the construction of postmodern American personal identity, subjectivity, and identification. I close with two related, but not identical, examples.

Pat Boone’s *Let Me Live* is an MTV-style music video that establishes the conditions of lyric subjectivity for the fetus. The conceit of the song is a dream, Boone’s dream, of a chorus of fetal voices that sing to him in his sleep, in the mode of a children’s choir. The fetal voices he hears appear to him as myriad stars, or as a thousand points of light; they converge on the camera lens like snowflakes on a car windshield. He remembers the dream as “indescribable,” “so profound/so troubling/[he] woke up trembling in tears”; but when he wakes he knows that “thousands of unborn children were singing to me/from their mothers’ wombs/and they’re not just mindless bits of flesh/they’re human beings.” What has happened to take him from the “indescribable” moment of feeling to a place of expertise? The genre of the fetal song that Boone’s commentary frames is something called the fetal diary, and it is a major invention of the pro-life movement, although not historically unprecedented. In this diary, the fetus records its sensations from the moment of conception and establishes a prehistory to any public sign of its existence. The internal narrative of “Let Me Live” extends from one to three months, beginning before the moment the imperfect maternal body can register knowledge of itself and ending when the fetus realizes the mother knows it exists. The visuals are suffused with crosscutting between fetal images and slow-motion images of visibly generic, happy family life. It does this to establish that the fetus knows about, and participates in, family life long before the mother even knows the fetus exists. In the meantime, the fetus speaks to Pat Boone. Presumably, it speaks to him because he has a personal relation to God, and perhaps because he himself is a “star,” and stars respond to him. *It is also because he is not a mother that he can experience what she cannot feel in her body.* She is numb to her knowledge, while he trembles from the sensation of it.

It is hard to think of a better example of how powerfully the diva fetus annihilates what Nathanson calls the merely “social”: class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, global economy, and markets in reproductive technology and policy. All of the obstacles to constructing generic expectations for personhood itself are not merely marginalized or replaced here—as they
are in the earlier examples—they are canceled out as material for knowledge and memory. The fetal diary is the origin of a new history, in which that material cannot become information. The fetus is incompetent to think about power as contingent. It speaks only of God’s creation.

But this kind of propaganda about power and ethics is not intrinsic to the cinematic attribution of voice to the fetal body. Amy Heckerling’s *Look Who’s Talking* films take up and exploit the problem in a sophisticated, and a sophistic, way, demonstrating what Paula Treichler has called “the national spirit of utter confusion” with respect to the meaning and the value of reproduction. The films are caught in a cluster of contradictions organized around questions of *survival*. Linking the logics of feminist consciousness to pro-life arguments about personhood, the mother and the fetus live parallel plots; staging problems of intimacy and technical competence at negotiating metropolitan culture, sexuality, and motherhood, the films demonstrate the contexts for their comedy as saturated by real, hard problems for women, but they also entertain consumers through a slapstick dialectic of feminine/maternal failure and mastery.

As for fetal representation itself, each film seems to come right out of Pat Boone’s and George Bush’s image archive, while also demonstrating genuine political distance from the semiotic field it uses. They each climax their opening scene of copulation with a similar one that takes place visually in the tissues of the penis, vagina, and uterus. Adopting, as well, the mise en scène of music video, they represent conception in the form of a primal sexual violence, the rape of an egg by a sperm. The egg, which has a female voice, never wants to be penetrated by the sperm, who has been egged on to this deed by the enthusiasm of other hearty, vocal male-voiced sperm produced in the ejaculation and by a Beach Boys sound track gloss. The sperm always want to penetrate the egg, and there always seems to be an egg ready to be penetrated: heterosex appears to tend naturally toward reproduction, whether or not the persons having it are having it for mere pleasure. Indeed, each of these conceptions are “accidents.” On penetration, the child is conceived immediately, in a burst of starry points of light. Soon thereafter, the embryos are talking that nondigetic fetus-talk, where ordinariness and celebrity meet, in the celluloid voices of Bruce Willis, Joan Rivers, and Roseanne Barr.

34. Willis’s casting as a fetal presence in these films repeats the role he played in late episodes of *Moonlighting*: while Maddy (Cybill Shepherd) worries about the paternity of
Yet, the films do narrate as a symptomatic social problem the becoming-stereotypical of the modern woman—usually white, middle-class status, and American. Anna Tsing argues that “in inverting all that is proper, [modern] ‘anti-mothers’ join female monsters of the 1960s and 1970s—monsters such as the fat woman (the anti-beauty) and the female boss—in the ongoing production and negotiation of gender.”35 In Look Who’s Talking, Kirstie Alley plays a high-powered accountant, covertly involved with George Segal, a client who runs a company named Chubby Charles.36 Segal plays a middle-aged white man with a tight stomach who displays enormous pictures of hugely fat art deco women on the walls of his office while surrounded by women with eating disorders and pushing products that encourage identification with fat. He is, in other words, a hysteric addicted to a world of compulsive consumption but in disavowal of his own desire for it—which is why he falls for his accountant, whose job is to keep track of appetite and accumulation without indulging in it herself.

Segal says, nonetheless, that he cannot divorce his wife, because she is bulimic (and “loses five pounds every time I say the word ‘divorce’”). Shortly after this conversation, we cut to Alley’s head in the toilet, discharging loud vomiting sounds. This tableau seems pathological, momentarily. While she first seems to be imitating the lover’s wife by vomiting, it turns out that this is morning sickness, and that Alley is pregnant. The fat that she will gain happily is proper heterosexual fat, and she is not doomed to mime the emaciated starvation of the desperate wife nor the autoerotic amplitude we witnessed as a social offense in “Fat.”

Although Alley is out of control, has transgressive sex, overeats in public, makes scenes, hits men, and yells and screams, she always looks robust and beautiful. She drinks apple juice; she eats entire Dove Bars. There is a kind of glow to heterosexual fat, although it is accompanied by terror that it might remain postpartum, and turn into the other, immoral kind. John Travolta, who by chance helps to deliver her child (and then follows

36. In my discussion of the cinema of the fetus, I use the actors’ “star names” to describe what their characters do in the films, to focus on the structures of commodity identification in Hollywood cinema and their effects on the comic circulation of what had been politically contested signs.
the condition of the fetus by becoming its father), remarks with approval that after the birth Alley quickly recoups her "figure," her cultural capital. But unmarried, and with no visible sign of her ongoing heterosexuality, which has been kept implicit by the love affair's illicitness, Alley remains abnormal. The film's code word for this condition is "lesbian," a term of disgrace she twice encounters. Because she is unintelligible at the very moment she should be most pregnantly iconic, she is caught in the discourse of sexual difference, capital exchange, class turmoil, sexual humiliation, and compulsory heterosexuality. This is the stuff of comedy. The films do not minimize its significance, or typicality, for a minute. Alley's assertion of control over sexuality and reproduction disturbs the gender norms of her class: her decline in status licenses the love plot she enters with Travolta, a working-class cab driver, who aspires to transcend ground transportation by becoming a pilot (the melodrama of his class ascension through marriage motivates Look Who's Talking, Too).

In the last months of Alley's pregnancy, she walks into her cheating lover's office just as a beautiful woman leaves it. Alley whines, "Albert, do you think that woman out there is pretty?" and announces, in contrast, "I look like a big fat pilgrim." She says this because she is wearing a black dress with a white collar, the way an American pilgrim might, and in saying this makes herself iconic, but also archaic, a body from the past. Her alterity to herself is a sign of what happens when an icon fails, becomes historical. Alley's self-description, on the other hand, designates a condition of coerced, alienated nationality and affiliates her with the stereotypes of African American women and other corporeal outsiders who have provided much matter for Hollywood comedy (although it must be noted that none of the fetus-driven comedies Hollywood cinema and television have generated feature African American, Hispanic, Asian, or strongly ethnicized women, who are still marked as class and therefore as nontranscendent, noncitizen subjects in the American popular cultural lexicon. These marked subjects have been available only, if at all, for maternal melodrama).

37. For readings of Alley's typicality as a failed maternal icon, see Susan Faludi, Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women (New York: Crown, 1991); E. Ann Kaplan, Motherhood and Representation, 205–9.
38. On gender, comedy, and carnivalesque inversion see Comedy/Cinema/Theory, ed. Andrew S. Horton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), especially Lucy Fischer, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child: Comedy and Matricide," 60–78. This excellent anthology says absolutely nothing about race comedy or race, genre, and the (re)production of marginality in Hollywood. Starting places for that kind of discussion are
Alley’s portrait of herself as a pilgrim amounts to a mere breath she takes before diving back into the search for a comfortable stereotype to inhabit, like a snail. But as mass nationality and mass culture meet on Alley’s body to stage a contest between hegemonic and marginal stereotypes, and as we witness her screwball incompetence at both the small and important technicalities of the body in everyday life, the foreignness of the fat, pregnant, female American pilgrim seems a good place to suspend this genealogy of the hybrid icon of fetal motherhood—its uncanny scale, its double interiority, its irreducibly complex corporeality—not with an astrological image of the imperial fetus itself, nor an icon of sacred stellar maternity, but with a constellation of questions about gender and fertility, and the state of nationality.

The pro-life image of the nation as parent with a compelling interest in its children/citizens has produced a discourse of autonomous fetality—a cruel, inhuman image, both because of the vulnerability of its body and because of its violent expropriation from the maternal site. The structure of rescue that this image forces any ethical subject to assume almost invariably erases another image, and with devastating effects: of women’s adult bodies that act in history and have value beyond their specific place in the sacred national temporality of reproduction. The pilgrimage of women toward citizenship travels a map made of multiple, overlapping, semitransparencies. There is the scenic route of natural extension, in which girls naturally reproduce, producing new generations of Americans; the civic, interstate route of national everyday life, in which a maternal ethic is limited to the realm of the social and denies the importance of politics for women or for the construction of the collective good life; and on another map, covered with incomplete roads and dotted lines, is the national space yet to be zoned, where women might experience their value as something other than, exorbitant to, the infantile national public sphere, in which fetuses star as citizen celebrities and women appear as little more than stage mothers to the nation. It is this condition of pilgrimage—through public spheres, where identity forms are undergoing rapid and uneven transformation of scale and value—that makes the woman, despite all appearances, both a

citizen manqué and “our” expert witness to the crisis in conceiving, not just of children but of democratic political agency in contemporary America.

7. Coda: “Hi, Hon!” or, How I Got My Evidence

When the woman in “Fat” experiences her customer’s fat agency as a lesson in the power of pregnancy, the fetus she imagines producing is unreal to her, an object of a fantasy game in which public norms of corporeal discipline and transgression provide an opportunity not for changing but for imagining or teasing change toward some barely evolved horizon. Fatness suggested the effacement of a violated personality by a surplus of body; it was less clear what, if anything, would happen under the new regime of superpersonhood. When I first imagined this essay, I thought I would have to write something about my own relation to fat, thinking that my readers would wonder, Is she fat? Since the paper’s first incarnation was as a talk, this anxiety faded: the audience had ocular evidence.

I have no anxiety about my reader thinking that I am a fetus (although I was), but I find that I cannot allay questions that my encounters with fetality have raised, questions of evidence, of professional discourse, and of autobiography. When I decided to write this essay, I thought it would be about the reinvention of American personhood from the point of view of fetal inner space. I suspected that the sound waves of the sonogram and the special effects of the photograph had secured a privileged perspective that continues to incite “opportunistic” changes in the legal and aesthetic domination of identity meanings in America. I expected to trace the escalating competition between the fetal “person” in the abstract, whose virtue and value appears morally uncontestable, and the women who claim priority over their bodies, although in the fundamentalist epoch of the 1980s, women’s very capacity to think, to choose, to act politically, and to desire nonreproductive sex made their very claims of authority appear suspect, grotesque, self-indulgent, and immoral, like fat.39

Under the pressure of isolating this problem in its condensed forms, I surveyed the cinema of the fetus for the ways it situates national and sexual fantasy in the same discursive field: for example, 2001: A Space Odyssey and its comic inversion in Joe Dante’s/Steven Spielberg’s Innerspace, the works of David Cronenberg that dramatize reproductive technologies

39. On the relation between fat, queerness, and shamed identities in America, see Moon and Sedgwick, “Divinity.”
(The Brood, Videodrome, Dead Ringers), Look Who’s Talking and Look Who’s Talking, Too, surrogacy films such as Immediate Family. Because the reproductive maternal body is considered broken or irrelevant in this moment of feminist backlash and imperial fetology, I also thought it necessary to read professional and lay pregnancy books—in particular, to compare the relation between professional discourses on fetal and maternal bodies and the kinds of communication addressed to the non“professionals,” the mothers.40 I was particularly interested in popular notions of fetal and maternal health, especially where the nutritional interests of the fetus seemed to clash with the anxiety new mothers regularly report about losing the “baby fat” gained during pregnancy.41 My university library had no books of this sort. So I called my sister, Valerie, who had just had a child. I asked her advice. After rattling off a bibliography, she offered to send me some of her favorite books, as well as a videotape of the sonogram her husband, Richard, had taken. The tape she sent me, titled Zak Davis: Sonogram to Two Years, incorporates more than I had expected. Valerie enclosed a note with the videotape: “Richard thought you might like to see Zak grow up, so he included highlights from his first two years.”

The contents of this tape moved and informed me in ways I could not have predicted. As I thought about bringing into representation the banalization of the fetus in America, the affective charge of the tape created static in my thinking: precisely what did the language of national public

40. For more on doctor/patient contestations over expertise, see Martin, The Woman in the Body; Ann Oakley, The Captured Womb (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); and Rapp, “Constructing Amniocentesis.”

spheres, identity politics, fetal motherhood, commodity identification, and mass culture have to do with the tape that my brother-in-law constructed and that my sister circulated privately to me? How did this communication from personal life provide information about the distortions of scale that govern the struggle being waged, on behalf of the fetus, over the national future? This fight is being cast as a struggle over sexual propriety, over national privilege, over what counts as a claim to justice in American history itself. But even this description forgets that the "body" over which this strife continues is (1) two bodies, sutured; (2) a corporeal complexity inhabited as a fact of ordinary experience; and (3) a realm of activity and agency whose untranslatability into the discourse of nationality remains a vitalizing and threatening political irritant. Thus the contingency of this familial communication; the ease with which the videotape provided a local context for reading the fetus; the "softness" of the anecdotal evidence: these accidents of information must be read as not only mine but as part of a communication network about fertility, family, and the technology of memory that enters the register of public discourse in ways oblique to the rest of this essay. In this coda, I want to trace three moments in the production of fetal privacy, all involving an encounter between the technology and the contingency of reproductive knowledge, to provide a counter to my working assumption that mass publicity is the dominant horizon of reproductive meaning in contemporary America. Publicity, indeed, is not simply public. The affective charge in the abortion controversy, as with all identity struggles, partly arises from the anxiety that social change provokes, that one's own fantasy identity appears to be up for revision in terms radically, incommensurably other.

"I Love Lucy, and She Loves Me". Who?

No clearer example of the anxiety wrought by changes in technology and privacy can be found than in the moment when, in October 1953, television became a reproductive technology. Due to the efforts of Desi Arnaz to incorporate the pregnant body of his wife, Lucille Ball, into that of the character Lucy Ricardo, real-time pregnancy was fictively narrated for the first time on American television. The nature of the discursive shift this plot represents involved exposing sexuality to the "domestic" national market:

42. For an analogous point of entry into the study of mass culture and nation-formation, see Meaghan Morris, "Banality in Cultural Studies," in Logics of Television, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
43. This is the opening lyric to the theme song of I Love Lucy.
Arnaz had to argue with Philip Morris, the sponsor, that the pregnancy in the private domestic space of the Ricardo family might actually increase consumer identification with the family, the show, and the products whose advertisements make narrative consumption on television seem “free.”

Linking pregnancy to sexuality and foreignness by announcing Lucy’s condition in French, the episode of I Love Lucy titled “Lucy is Enceinte” broke the taboo on reproductive discourse that American television had always honored and plotted its breaking of the silence as a rupture of other relations as well. Ethel walks into Lucy’s apartment: “Hi, honey! Where are you going so early?” 44 Lucy responds that she feels “dauncy,” and explains that this is a word her grandmother used to describe feeling “bleah” without being sick. Ethel wonders if Lucy is “going to have a baby.” Lucy, incredulous, says “A baby?” Ethel: “Baby. That was my grandmother’s word for a little person.” When the pregnant and ecstatic Lucy returns from the doctor, she says “We’re going to have a baby!” Ethel responds, “We are? I’ve never had a baby before! Or been let in on one so early.” Ricky Ricardo closes the show singing, “We’re Having a Baby, My Baby and Me,” thus confirming that he, and not Ethel, is the baby’s other parent. But the early scenes depicting Ethel and Lucy’s confusion about the status of their intersubjectivity remind us how thoroughly new knowledge about reproduction requires ad-libbing about identity and sociality outside of the position “mother.” Who is having the baby? The people who are “let in” to the reproduction via the forms of intimacy the mother deploys. I Love Lucy introduces its consumers to pregnancy by contrasting traditional bourgeois fantasies of feminine masquerade with the world of everyday life distraction, which includes, on this show, Ricky’s parallel professional theatricality.45 In one scene, Lucy practices telling Ricky the news, saying “Ricky, darling, we are about to experience a blessed event,” while making such passionate love to her own hand that the embarrassed Ethel leaves the room; when Ricky finally learns, it is after Lucy has given up on telling him directly, and he is actually at the Copa-
cabana in a tuxedo, publicly singing the song that contains the message of his own paternity. This surplus of failed performances reveals the frantic improvisation around the new, often unpredicted knowledge that pregnancy heralds, especially with respect to the repeated scene of revelation: how do you tell, what do you tell, who do you tell, what are you telling, when should you tell, even your closest friends? The technological reconfiguration of privacy through the sign of Lucy’s pregnancy does not eliminate the difficulty of these questions but intensifies it, representing the chaos, not the certainty, of even the most authentic knowledge of authenticity that pregnancy represents.

_Innerspace_

When “star quality” refers to the relation between outer space and reproductive technologies, the aura of the natural that accompanies the fetus merges privacy and nationality in a way quite different than in the domestic scene of _I Love Lucy_. (Still, Ricky’s exotic Cuban figure and the song he sings in Spanish are signs of his alterity to the fetus, which becomes American by being born on television). Zoe Sofia and Vivian Sobchak have described expertly the national/imperial politics of the final image of _2001: A Space Odyssey_: a huge, Lennart Nilsson-like fetus floating in space. This fetal image joins the movie camera and the special effect to the history of the telescope and the microscope’s centrality to national fantasy: the authenticity putatively beyond family and nation that science secures for empire. They describe how the capacity to miniaturize made possible the lightness of the computer and the spaceship, enabling artificial knowledge to surpass self-knowledge, family identity, capital, politics, and earth itself; the fetus, in this regard, is the vehicle for merging technology with nature in its most primal incarnation. Sofia argues that the aura of nuclear annihilation becomes a part of an imperial/patriarchal erotics that focuses on the fetus as a sign that pure life will exist in the universe after nuclear death; Sobchak adds that “during this period, patriarchal and capitalist America was searching for a way to transform its moral guilt and its political, economic, and social failures at home and abroad into something more supportable. Toward the end of the seventies, popular imagery began transcoding American bourgeois culture’s lack of effectivity into child-like innocence, and its failed aggressivity into a transcendent victimization.”

Back on earth, nineteen years later, the same configuration of anxiety and aggressivity reappears in the film *Innerspace* (1987), a fetal screwball comedy, with its focus on the corporeal and imperial fantasies of the military-industrial complex. It has no interest in establishing providence and national holiness through fetal astral projection but rather locates the relation between fetality and banality within contemporary American history and culture. In *Look Who’s Talking*, the fetus is a featured player with more savvy wit and subjectivity than any adult: indeed, the film enacts the fetus’s austral decay as synonymous with the process of growing up. *Innerspace*, in contrast, describes, appropriately for its title, the banalization of private life, of the unspectacular everyday failed body, sexuality, and health of everyone who lives in Postmodernity, U.S.A.—Silicon Valley, California. In this context, the fetus represents the utopian other—of everything imaginable. Untainted by the waste and violence of American state capitalism, corporate bureaucracies, information culture, and consumer decadence, the miraculousness of the fetus is nonetheless available to Americans only by way of these very domains.

In addition, the forms of corporate power available to postmodern science fiction are here actively mapped onto disruptions of sexual norms. To map the heterosexual surface of the traditional screwball comedy onto sexual identifications after the 1960s requires redescribing, as well, the relation between gender, sexuality, and codes of humiliation in the Hollywood film. The fetal moment of *Innerspace* is the effect of many causes: Dennis Quaid, an alcoholic, former ace Air Force officer, has been miniaturized and inserted into a syringe that will be shot into a rabbit (a rabbit test, whose archaic symbolic force as a medical test for pregnancy is not lost on the film); then, an attempt at international industrial espionage (the animus that drives the "plot") disrupts and botches the injection of Quaid into the rabbit; the scientist who escapes with the needle that contains Quaid gets shot from behind, staggers into a mall, where Martin Short, a grocery store cashier, has just purchased cruise tickets; the scientist injects Dennis Quaid into Martin Short's derriere. The backside has been designated the body part of erotic choice by the end of the film's first segment, as a butt-naked Quaid is left howling on the streets of San Francisco after his journalist girlfriend, Meg Ryan, strips him of his towel, his sexual security, his self-esteem. This cathexis on, and injection into, the male derriere signifies this

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Lyon, Lynn Spigel, and Janet Bergstrom (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 14–15, Sobchak's emphasis. See also Sofia, "Exterminating Fetuses."
as an AIDS- and certainly a gay-conscious text, although not in a coherent way: the exchange of fluids and bodies in this sexual triangle plays a crucial role in vitalizing masculine heterosexuality in the narrative. Martin Short’s femininity, established by his well-known Katharine Hepburn impersonation, is central to the star aura of the text; but Short, playing a nervous, sexually insipid hypochondriac, is actually masculinized and heterosexualized by carrying Quaid in his body. Inseminated with Quaid, he gets to be a spy, a policeman, a knight; he gets to act as a sexual relay between Quaid and Ryan.

In sum, *Innerspace* offers a kind of polymorphous sexual mobility as the heterosexuality of late capitalism. In the key scene of fetal imaging, Short romantically kisses Ryan and through his saliva transfers Quaid into her body. At first, Quaid, confused by the huge rush of fluid Short’s arousal provokes in his body, floats in her body unaware, thinking he has remained in Short’s. Suddenly, as his spaceship floats down, Quaid beholds a shocking thing: a fetus Ryan carries, a fetus Quaid and Ryan begot in the days when he was bigger than a sperm. The scene remasculinizes Quaid. He becomes a master of knowledge and its disciplinarian: on finally emerging from Short’s body, his first question to Ryan is, “Why didn’t you tell me?” Of course, she doesn’t know that she’s pregnant.

One lesson of *Innerspace* is that the cinematic fetus registers the emergence of cyborg masculinity, in contrast to the transformation of feminine power in the situation of the comedy in *I Love Lucy*. In addition, *Innerspace* shows that the cinematic meaning of “inner space” circulating around the fetus increasingly depends on conventions of communication outside of a sacred/national discourse of “abstract” power. It takes up, instead, as crisis, the secular emplotment of patriarchal sexual intersubjectivity in an age of miniaturization. (As one character says in *Innerspace*: “Space is a flop. Miniaturization, Jack: that’s the ticket.”) Miniaturization—or diminished expectations? The comedy of *Innerspace* is dark and bleeds into the male melodrama that the public cinema of reproductive technology repeatedly stages: nightmares in which American white men can no longer assume a priori jurisdiction over space, nation, women, knowledge, scale, and size—in science, politics, and everyday life.

*Zak Davis: From Sonogram to Two Years*

We can assume, by now, that the overt ideological communication embodied in the fetus refers to the semiotic fields of abortion, heterosexuality, gender properties, constitutional law, and national fantasy. But if the
fetus must be revealed, must become photogenic, the historic information about power, authenticity, and futurity in the public sphere that its figure condenses must be linked to its historicity as a sign of the ordinary, as well. I have noted the new forms of affectivity that sonographic representation has generated for mothers. Their sensational knowledge of pregnancy superceded by the technical mastery of fetology, women report adapting to the prebirth personhood by giving the fetus interim names, framing its image, sharing it with friends and relatives. Hard evidence for this emerging transformation in the boundedness of domestic privacy is hard to come by, though the social energy generated by circulating sonograms and other new prenatal information is easy to come by anecdotally. Ask anyone who has recently been pregnant. After seeing sonograms, my sister Valerie named one fetus “Buford” and another “Spud”; my sister-in-law called hers “Cle-tus the Fetus”; one friend named hers “Shrimp,” another “Thumper,” and so on. A standard comic hieroglyph for this unprecedented phenomenon can also be found in an MTV-style video montage following the progress of Kirstie Alley’s pregnancy in Look Who’s Talking. Going through the motions of pregnancy sans husband, she gathers her women friends around her. Among sequences of their comic incompetence in decorating the baby’s room and putting together baby furniture, the women cluster around Alley to coo at a series of sonogram images.

The nostalgic energy for a family that has never existed incites the new reproductive technologies—which now include cinema and television—to exploit commodity identification for the purposes of promoting “family values” that are said to exist outside of politics. The “family” is constituted by control over knowledge and representation, and has little to do with anyone’s everyday practice or performance. We have seen, in Look Who’s Talking, that the motivation for domesticity that the cinema of the fetus represents might be as simple as that of a screwball comedy, in which the comedy of remarriage is modified into a comedy of marriage: the body of the sexually active, the single, and the pregnant woman represents the “family” already broken, a body whose wholeness resides only in the romantic fantasy lives of Alley and her friends. The creative child-care collaboration of Alley and John Travolta retrieves that fantasy into the reality of the film by the end, when Alley has a second baby and makes a nuclear, natural family from the scraps of the coarse one.

Zak Davis: Sonogram to Two Years is similarly a document of family-

47. See the works by Ginsburg, Martin, and Rapp, cited in note 7 above.
making, and it would be easily characterized as a document tracing the willed fulfillment of privileged stereotypes. But I have tried to show that the fact of stereotypicality denotes not the exception of identity formation in America but the conventional capital of mass national culture, the place where glamour and ordinariness meet in practical subjectivities. This videotape opens in the sonogram room, where my sister (Valerie), my mother (Joanne), the technician (?), and my brother-in-law (Richard) are commenting on the sonogram screen. Valerie and my mother are briefly visible in this scene; otherwise, the commentary is disembodied and the sonogram machine dominates the frame. Richard’s voice carries a great deal of authority—he’s a doctor, and he knows how to make home videos and to interpret the images Valerie generates. “Say ‘hi,’ hon,” Richard says to Valerie in the opening shot. “Hi, hon!” she says. Throughout, my sister makes jokes about her body (she shows the camera that her belly button has popped, she says “No crotch shots,” she says she feels like a whale), but basically she is quiet and attentive; my pro-choice mother glosses the hard-to-read sonogram image (“He’s a little person!”), hears an ambulance siren, makes a Nazi joke (“They’re coming to get us!”), and conflates viewing with eating the fetus (“Isn’t he delicious?”); Richard talks to the technician, alternating delight with shoptalk. In the next scene, the camera returns to the friendly salute, “Say ‘hi,’ hon”/“hi, hon!,” and Valerie shifts between explaining to the camera that she is in labor and asking Richard the ordinary questions of domestic intimacy (“Do you think we should call the synagogue from the hospital?”). We see many segments of her descent, or ascent, into labor, each punctuated with “Say ‘hi,’ hon”/“hi, hon!.” In the last, Valerie huddles in a fetal position, as if she is resting. She is connected to many monitors. She is green and shaking intensely in the dusky room. In response to Richard’s request to say “ ‘hi,’ hon,” she lifts her hand at the camera and closes her eyes, exhausted.

The next sequences record the quite stunning baby right after the birth—getting weighed, being covered with a latex hat, crying. Richard talks empathetically to him from behind the camera, calls him “buddy”; then the grandparents join the parents and infant in the hospital room. The shots in the room are so beautifully, symmetrically arranged—one set of grandparents on each side of the bed, one set of grandparents holding the baby, then the other—there seems nothing accidental or improvisational about this particular sequencing of family performance. Once he leaves the hospital, Zak’s emergence into motor and psychic autonomy becomes visible: Zak is a lump with eyes dressed in clothes; Zak, propped on pillows, grabs helium
balloons; Zak plays in the bathtub and watches himself in the mirror as his parents dry him. Richard and Valerie act as relaxed as lay people being filmed can be, adapting the conventional oscillations of home movie subjects between self-consciousness and obliviousness, involved as they are in the routines of everyday bodily maintenance in the nuclear household.

Then we arrive at Zak's first birthday. There is a special poignancy for me watching this first birthday, for I well remember Valerie's (she's five years younger than I am; we had just moved to a new house). On her first birthday, she was set in front of a huge chocolate-frosted cake; she delighted us all by smearing it all over her face and everything, in her first official assertion of agency and competence, or sentience. Zak has either inherited this will to pleasure from his mother, or the home movies and pictures from Valerie's birthday have become so iconic in the rituals of our family memory that she arranged his scene as a repetition of her own. In any case, the scene of my memory is reproduced in the video, as from a painting.48 At one point, Valerie sets Zak up with his presents. We watch him learning about what a gift is, and learning how to prolong anticipation by opening it slowly. As a one year old, he is barely competent to sit up, anticipate, and open presents all at once. Finally, he gets the wrapping off the huge present his grandparents have given him. This present seems not especially to move him (the way his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles delight him on his second birthday), but Valerie and Richard seem to watch with pleasure as Zak pulls from his first birthday present box—what else?—six videotapes.

When I watched this, I felt how totally appropriate it was that Zak received videotapes on his first birthday. He was constituted in Valerie's memory as a sonogram, in his own and mine as a sonogram on a videotape. He is fundamentally the star of his own video, his life. He identifies totally with the stars he watches on the VCR and takes on their identities in play. The ease with which video can be made, purchased, copied, and circulated brings the quotidian into our collective memory of him in such a way that the accident of the Disney videos he received seemed also an accidental truth about him, and about the future of his history. For even if

48. After writing this, I called Valerie and asked her about the birthday scene, and she acknowledged that those images and repeated narratives of her childhood did indeed influence her construction of Zak's birthday. My mother called shortly after to say that, contrary to both of our recollections, it was Valerie's six-month birthday and that only one picture of it, taken by a neighbor, ever existed.
the fetus as a person has become ordinary in popular discourse, the new technology also generates a sense of surprise, contingency, and accident that foregrounds the ways popular technologies alter the possibilities of enacting identity in personal, as well as political, domains of information and entertainment.

This is not simply an instance of evaluating the technology of middle-class familial theatricality in late capitalism: the video camera is a direct extension of the portable camera, whose mass production reconstructed childhood and domestic memory, as Bourdieu and Barthes have described, since the turn of the century. In addition, the contrast between the formal superpersonality of Zak, Buford, Spud, Cletus the Fetus, and Shrimp, on the one hand, and the generic fatality of the unnamed “unborn” heralded by pro-life activists, on the other, is worth investigating, because the authority of the information that circulates around them and gives them identity reveals harshly the fault lines that separate forms of identity politics in America today, showing, as well, the limits of identity and expressivity as forms of optimism and resistance. As in the case of Alley’s figure in Look Who’s Talking, we witness a bubbling over of hegemonic and marginal stereotypes, in a way that marks its politics as epochal, historic, and in the present tense.

Benedict Anderson writes that the entombed “unknown soldier” must be personally anonymous in order to sanctify the nationality of life and death: the muteness of the soldier’s historicity is the setting for the jewel of his nationality.49 I read that the Roman Catholic Church plans to erect a Tomb of the Unknown Fetus in Catholic cemeteries throughout America; the anonymity of the fetus becomes a necessary precondition to the form of politically useful empathy constructed by the pro-life movement.50 It does not follow that naming secures historicity and human justice to the person: there is no opposite to the “generic,” just as there is no formal solution to the problem of citizenship that the fetus raises for fetuses, women, mothers, Americans. When the state regulates foreign aid packages according to the birth control policies of less industrialized nations, while profiting from military-industrial labor exploitation in America and elsewhere, we know that the political imagination’s displacement away from adults to the horizon of “our children,” “the unborn,” signifies a widespread incapacity to con-

ceive, with the overabundance of information we already have, a positive sense of the present or the future of the adult American. Fetuses become the “problem” in the absence of a sustained critical national political culture. Simultaneously, the ongoing practices of a private-information public generate new forms of sociality that displace the spheres of mass politics, with consumers bored and alienated even from the banalized sensational versions of their own lives they receive from docudrama, infomercials, and political news propaganda. “Hi, hon!” As I write this sentence, as a letter to unnamed recipients (who might respond “I’m Batman!”), the television news anchor reports that someone else’s home video has become important news. She closes the story, noting, “This video is being sent to the Smithsonian.”