Imagining the Unborn in the Ecuadoran Andes
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Fetal personhood is not a "property" that can or will be "discovered" with greater scientific knowledge or increased technological capabilities, but is produced in and through the very practices that claim merely to "reveal" it.


Fetuses are rapidly being granted the status of cultural icons, present not only in the industrialized West but also as actors on the international reproductive rights scene. It is useful, then, for feminists to attend to the diverse cultural, national, and political contexts within which persons are brought into social being. In the above epigraph, Valerie Hartouni argues that "fetal persons" are produced through social practices which themselves constitute and reify the category. This article looks at how women in highland Ecuador imagine and talk about the unborn and how their social practices might illuminate the processes through which fetuses are "naturalized" in the United States.

"Fetal persons" have for several years now been the subject of vigorous public debate in the United States, as physicians disagree over the wisdom of treating fetal "patients," lawyers struggle over the status of embryos fertilized in vitro and other fetal "plaintiffs" not recognized by the Constitution as legal persons, policymakers dispute the wisdom of mandatory prenatal testing and appropriate custody arrangements for offspring of multiple "parents," and the general public argues over whether fetuses can or should be treated as social subjects. The discourses themselves are constitutive; in other words, the more we puzzle over fetuses, the more we legitimate
Computer generated image.
the subject, and, by extension, the subjectivity, of the "fetal person." What is particularly striking about many of the U.S. debates is the extent to which popular appropriations of science help to constitute fetal subjects. Prolife activists in the United States often call upon the authority of science to support biologically deterministic models of when and how life begins. Rarely, however, do we recognize the extent to which the popularization of science is manipulated to support a personification of fetuses, and rarely do we recognize how unique this is to American culture.

This article reflects on the uniqueness of U.S. abortion discourse by juxtaposing it against a landscape in which fetuses are generally not considered persons. In the Ecuadoran highlands where I have conducted anthropological fieldwork, women and men employ a variety of social practices that obscure and impede the possibility that fetuses will be granted personhood. This results not simply from differential access to sophisticated scientific or technological knowledge or equipment but also from a constellation of embedded social practices that render the contents of the womb as ambiguous and uncertain. In Ecuador, the course of pregnancy is governed by women themselves, who use overlapping and sometimes competing discourses to make sense of their own circumstances and the will of God. Even when the highland women use ultrasound screening, they do not personify or individualize fetuses the way people do in the United States; in fact, the women I interviewed rarely used the word *feto*, preferring *criatura* (creature) or *venidero* (the one to come). By looking more closely at constructions of pregnancy and the unborn in Ecuador, I hope to interrogate and destabilize certain scientized suppositions about what people take as the biological "nature" of fetuses in the United States.3

**THE EMERGENCE OF FETAL PERSONS**

In the United States today, the right-to-life movement and right-wing cultural critics use popular understandings of science to invent and reinforce a unified "fetal subject" at multiple sites and at several levels of analysis: historical, rhetorical, visual, and cultural. They rely on the popular interpretation
and widespread utilization of ultrasonography, intrauterine electron microscopy, and new reproductive technologies, for example, to support their contention that "life begins at conception" and that "the fetus" is a gradually emerging person endowed with genetic uniqueness and biological facticity. To phrase the social relationship between the born and the unborn in biological terms, as they do, is "in effect an ideological mechanism to turn social facts into natural and therefore immutable facts." The social practices that hitch scientific authority to the prolife cause have worked to keep the abortion debate focused on fetuses by emphasizing (and often literally illustrating) that "the fetus" is a miraculously complex biological entity. The success of this prolife political strategy, however, should not keep us from noticing that the practices that contribute to the social construction of the fetal subject are multiple, omnipresent, overlapping, and culturally particular.

Examples of the social practices that constitute fetuses come from the fields of medicine, ethics, religion, journalism, law, technology, entertainment, politics, and the academy. Some of them have global ambitions, as manifested, for example, in the work of the internationally oriented prolife organization, Human Life International. Some social practices associated with fetal personhood are nationally specific; for example, in Ireland where the contents of women's wombs have become implicated in debates over membership in the European community. Some of the practices are large, public assertions of fetal personhood, such as Operation Rescue demonstrations (broadcast throughout the world on CNN) or anti-abortion billboards featuring ten-foot photographs of disembodied fetuses. Other constitutive practices occur in private: a pregnant woman thumbs through What to Expect When You're Expecting looking for a drawing that corresponds to the gestational age of the fetus she carries, so she can fit a visual image to the fluttering in her womb. Simple conversations among coworkers or friends can create fetal personhood, such as discussions among members of a medical team debating the ethics of intervening surgically given a diagnosis of fetal abnormality. When physicians and midwives use ultrasound or fetal monitoring, for example, they enact the importance of fetal well-being. When pregnant women and their partners ascertain fetal sex and use
that knowledge to name and personify an unborn child, they construct the fetus as a valued member of the family. When entertainment magazines print stories about unborn "celebrity children," they contribute to the personification of fetuses. Over the past ten years, "fetal persons" have emerged from the realm of obstetricians' and ethicists' offices into popular culture, where they feature in film, print, and advertising. Fetuses are depicted so regularly in everyday U.S. culture that their presence—outside the context of pregnant women's bodies—is scarcely remarkable anymore. Their presence has come to be accepted, by many, as natural. The social value attributed to fetuses is accentuated in the United States by low fertility rates, which make each pregnancy and child seem more precious, and by access to contraception which insures that many U.S. women have less experience with unchecked fertility (and pregnancy losses) than their Ecuadoran counterparts.

The cumulative effect of these social circumstances is that North Americans have begun—in historically unprecedented ways—to individualize, personify, and sometimes even glorify and prize fetuses as "super-subjects." Of course, the personification of the fetal subject is not uncritically endorsed by all segments of the U.S. population, and there is considerable disagreement about the status of fetal subjects, pregnancy, parenthood, and reproduction. U.S. reproductive ethics debates are too complex, diverse, and cross-cutting to be reduced to some monolithic "cultural norms." Nonetheless, the recent historical trend toward reification of the fetal subject is striking if the United States is compared even with other Western societies. It is my hope that the cross-cultural comparison I offer here can help us to realize the many ways in which "the fetus we know" is historically and culturally unique.

**METHODS**

This study was motivated by my conviction that a comparative anthropological perspective on abortion and fetal personhood in non-Western societies might point out the culture-bound nature of U.S. reproductive rights debates. In particular, I was motivated by the obsession in my own country with the relationship between ideas about fetal personhood and the morali-
ty of abortion. But of course this link proved to be too tight, and
too tightly American, because "abortion" is the end product of a
long chain of social circumstances. In 1988 I spent two months
in the Andean town of San Gabriel (pop. 10,000), Carchi
Province, Ecuador, about four hours by car north of Quito, the
capital. In San Gabriel and surrounding hamlets, I conducted
semistructured interviews (tape-recorded, of one to two hours
in duration) with thirty mestizo women. Interviews were ar-
ranged by my research assistant, Blanca, a twenty-year-old
woman who had grown up in this blustery, potato-growing re-
gion (where people referred to themselves as borregos, or sheep,
because they have a reputation as followers rather than lead-
ers, and because warm woolen clothes help people to stay
warm at 10,000 feet). Blanca and I ventured out each morning,
sometimes trudging up and down the hills of town on foot, and
sometimes hitching a ride into surrounding hamlets, to inter-
view women in their homes. We took advantage of the mid-
morning lull in a woman's workday to ask her, indirectly, about
her perceptions of the unborn by asking about her own fertility
history; experience with pregnancy, birth, and child death; and
her knowledge of local reproductive ethics. On our way back to
the center of town, we would often stop in the cemetery, coffin-
maker's shop, vital statistics registry, or health clinic. In 1992 I
returned to Ecuador to spend six months in Quito, where I con-
ducted an equal number of interviews with physicians, nurses,
midwives and midwifery students, clergy, and members of local
women's organizations. The research was designed to investi-
gate the relationship between ideas about fetal identity, devel-
oment, and personhood, and the morality and practice of in-
duced abortion.

I had initially assumed that a country not polarized by pub-
lic debate over abortion might endorse a cultural consensus
about the moral status of the unborn. Unlike the United
States, Ecuador has no history of public controversy over abor-
tion. No public initiatives, past or present, have sought to lib-
eralize church or state positions on abortion. I interpreted the
lack of dissent as a reflection of unanimity and looked for the
consensus I imagined must exist. My assumption, of course,
 implied a unified and coherent image of what a fetus is, and
this assumption turned out to be highly problematic, as I show
throughout this article. In San Gabriel, the fetus was never regarded separately from the pregnant woman, and women's stories about the events of pregnancy and the status of the unborn were as diverse as their experiences. In Quito I found a near-complete void on the subject of abortion and fetuses. I found no pictures of fetuses in magazines or newspapers, only one sensationalist episode of a television talk show focusing on women who had had abortions and the trauma and shame they had experienced. This focus highlighted the woman's ethical standing but not that of the fetus. There were no locally made movies about abortion or intrauterine development (although a dubbed version of The Silent Scream was occasionally aired on television). What I found, and what is described below, is that pregnant women are fused with and inseparable from the creatures they gestate. Consequently, responses to my questions about fetuses generated a great deal of incertitude and ambivalence. People often did not hold ready-formed opinions on these subjects, and they frequently disagreed among themselves. I quickly abandoned the search for a cultural consensus, even among the relatively homogeneous Catholic mestizo women in San Gabriel. The emphasis on consistency, I realized, was of course particular to the United States, where we privilege philosophies and narratives that can boast moral consistency. In the push to find consistency, scientific observations of fetal development are mustered to create representations of "the fetus" as a coherent biological "thing."

The focus on consistency is evident when anti-abortion activists who favor capital punishment—and prochoice proponents who oppose it—are criticized as hypocrites. Meanwhile, the moral high road is claimed by advocates of a "seamless web" philosophy, who preach respect for the right to life of all living things, including animals, murderers, and the unborn. In contrast, many of the Ecuadorans I spoke with did not attempt to construct a consistent response in answer to my probing questions about fetal status. Their social and political milieu does not require that they strive for confident or coherent answers to such complex and vexing issues. Several people patiently explained that ambiguity and uncertainty made perfect sense when confronted with life's most profound mysteries. It led me to wonder why, in my country, we insist on erasing the mysterious, on knowing what is, perhaps, ultimately unknowable.
ECUADOR AND THE LIMINAL UNBORN

There are many reasons why North Americans might assume that Latin Americans respect the unborn. *Clandestine Abortion: A Latin American Reality* states that in "every country but Cuba, legal abortion is rarely available except for the strictest medical reasons." The region has been dominated by Catholicism for 500 years, and the Vatican has become an increasingly ardent proponent of fetal personhood over the past twenty years. Loyal Latin American Catholics are sometimes heard to say that they will bear "as many children as God will send" (*los que Dios me mande*). It would be a mistake, however, to conclude on the basis of these stereotypes that Latin Americans subscribe to the notion that fetuses are persons. Because "the fetus" is a culturally specific conceptual entity and not a biological "thing," and because "the fetus" is created in particular cultural circumstances, I realized that I would have to stop thinking and speaking about "the fetus" if I was to understand how the unborn are imagined in Ecuador.

In the rural highlands of northern Ecuador, the unborn are imagined as liminal, unripe, and unfinished creatures. Nascent persons are brought into being slowly, through processes rife with uncertainty and moral ambiguity. Adults are slow to assign individual identity and personhood to the not-yet-born and the newly born. These *criaturas*, as they are often called, bear little resemblance to disembodied, technologized, visualized, personified, and revered U.S. fetuses. These unknown, unknowable *criaturas* may teeter on the cusp of personhood for months before being fully welcomed into a human community. I will argue that in Ecuador social practices reinforce and perpetuate fetal liminality, insuring that personhood will not be easily attributed to the unborn. This article describes several of the social practices that encode, reaffirm, and perpetuate the notion that the unborn are not persons, that they remain ambiguous and liminal.

First, although abortion is illegal and rhetorically condemned by both church and state, there is little enforcement of anti-abortion laws (although the full extent of reliance on induced abortion is unknown). Second, there seems to be a large dose of social ambiguity built into determining "who counts" as the unborn come into social being. All Ecuadoran women do
not count their children in the same ways nor employ the same conventions to number their babies. The civil registry does not have well-established or well-enforced procedures for counting live births, fetal deaths, or infant deaths. Third, there is no apparent social consensus for determining how to handle fetal death, including, for example, the baptismal, naming, and burial rites appropriate to miscarried, aborted, or stillborn fetuses. Indeed, a special category of liminal quasi-person (the *auca*) exists in the rural highlands to encompass unbaptized souls and other not-quite-persons. Fourth, induced abortion is characterized by many as a sin, but it is a sin of self-mutilation rather than murder. At issue is the mutilation of the pregnant woman's own body, not the personhood of the fetus. Fifth, beliefs about the course of fetal development range across a wide spectrum. Women contradict each other about when the fetus is "formed" and whether and how formation might affect the morality of abortion. The indeterminacy of the beginnings of life extend to the postpartum period; newborns are often described as still in the process of becoming, not yet fully human. Sixth, it seems that the work of "building personhood" at the beginnings of life is largely a female responsibility; women are predominantly responsible for bringing persons into being. As in the United States, each of these social practices has a particular context in which it is invoked, but the frames of discourse invariably overlap and reinforce each other. The cumulative effect of these social practices in Ecuador is that the unborn remain predominantly blurred, inchoate, and incipient.

**AN OPEN SECRET: ILLEGAL ABORTION**

*Un secreto a voces* (an open secret) is how many people in Ecuador describe the availability of abortion. Abortion is officially illegal but nonetheless widely available. Estimates of abortion rates are unreliable in Ecuador, as elsewhere in Latin America, for at least two reasons. First, most estimates are based on numbers of women hospitalized with complications resulting from a combination of both spontaneous and induced abortions. Of abortions registered by hospitals surveyed in Quito, 98 to 99 percent were classified as "type unspecified [i.e., spontaneous vs. induced] and others." Second, hospital-
based figures can capture only those women with access to health services, thus excluding much of the rural population, and do not reflect the numbers of women whose abortions are successful and safe. The few existing studies of abortion rates in Ecuador have concentrated on data collection and analysis techniques and do not attempt to estimate the rates per se.14

The Ecuadoran Constitution (Article 25) was changed in 1978 to specify that "a child will be protected from conception onward." Similarly, the Civil Code (Article 61) specifies that "the law protects the life of the unborn" (del que está por nacer), and the Penal Code (Articles 441 through 447) specifies the penalties for abortion. Ecuadoran law allows abortion under only two circumstances: to save the life of a woman, or when pregnancy is the result of the rape of a mentally ill woman (mujer idiota o demente).15 In what seems a vestige from a more chivalrous era, the penalty for induced abortion can be reduced if a judge determines that the abortion was performed "to protect a woman's honor" (aborto honoris causa). The fact that abortion providers and clients are infrequently prosecuted in Ecuador suggests that the practice of abortion is tolerated by a state apparatus that protects the unborn only at the level of rhetoric.

Ecuadorans might continue to have abortion both illegal and widely available as long as the issue remains below the surface of public discourse.16 Occasionally a newspaper article or television talk show will give journalists, politicians, or clergy an opportunity to condemn abortion, but their bluster is generally treated as requisite occupational rhetoric rather than a realistic recipe for action. (One thoughtful priest, for example, told me that Vatican doctrine is too rigid to apply to the complex circumstances faced by his parishioners.) Occasionally I noted an oblique reference to abortion in the sardonic, ephemeral graffiti found around Quito (such as crece, crece, hombrecito, hay un aborto esperando por ti, "grow, grow, little man, there's an abortion waiting for you"). Apart from these quixotic commentaries, however, there is no public debate over abortion in Ecuador. No one calls for more rigorous enforcement of anti-abortion laws, and only a few Ecuadoran women's rights activists argue that abortion should be "decriminalized" (descriminalizado or despenalizado, as distinct from "legalized").
Those who do point out that decriminalization would stop people from profiting from women's misfortunes, prevent the complications that result from clandestine abortion, and reduce the maternal mortality rate and the hospital costs associated with treating abortion complications. Once again, their focus is not on the fetus. Their views, however, are not representative of the public stance taken by many other Ecuadoran women's rights activists. The activists I spoke with in Quito said that the women's movement could not be advanced by making a public issue of abortion at this time. Such a strategy could easily backfire, they said, leaving women worse off than they currently are.

For the purposes of this article, the public and legal domains are significant for what they omit. Abortion is an issue in Ecuador, however covert; but fetal personhood is not. Fetuses are notoriously absent from the *sotto voce* conversations I had with Ecuadorans about abortion. There is virtually no mention of maternal-fetal conflict, nor of "fetal rights." The state's tacit acceptance of clandestine abortion could be viewed as society's pragmatic way of acknowledging that circumstances sometimes compel women to terminate their pregnancies despite the legal and social stigma. The law purports to value and protect fetal life and personhood, but lack of enforcement of anti-abortion laws belies the state's commitment. Fetuses may be theoretical persons by Ecuadoran law, but in social practice there are no fetal persons.

**NUMBERING THE BABIES**

One way to ascertain the social importance granted to fetuses and infants is to look at whether and how they are enumerated. In this section I argue that the distinction between fetuses and infants is blurred and imprecise in Ecuador, as manifested by how women in San Gabriel enumerate their own offspring and by how civil registration procedures both perpetuate and reinforce this uncertainty.

The women I interviewed in San Gabriel did not share among themselves a common method for enumerating their offspring. When I asked, ¿Cuántos hijos tiene usted? ("How many children do you have?") , some women interpreted *hijos* to mean
"pregnancies," in which case all pregnancies—including miscarriages—figured among a woman's "children." But to others *hijos* meant "children born alive" or "living children." The point always required clarification during an interview. When Doña Gabriela said, "Ten children, six living," I initially thought she meant that four children had died in childhood, until she explained that one of her ten pregnancies had resulted in a miscarriage at approximately two months' gestation. Similarly, Doña María, a seventy-year-old widow in San Gabriel, answered me by saying she had sixteen children. "Living?" I asked. "No," she said, "only five are living." The sixteen included four miscarriages (*arrojos*, literally "shedding blood"), four children who died in infancy, and three who died later in life.

The differences were significant to me because U.S. conventions mandate that people should distinguish among the *hijos* socially erased by miscarriage or induced abortion, the miscarried *hijos* who do not live to be born, the *hijos* born dead, and those born alive. Ecuadoran women make similar distinctions, of course, cognitively and at the level of lived experience, but in numbering their offspring they have a great deal of latitude in deciding how to classify and represent the differences among living, stillborn, live-born, miscarried, adopted, and deceased children.

The fact that women can count their *hijos* in so many different yet equally acceptable ways suggests two things. First, it suggests that every pregnancy can be—but is not necessarily—socially significant, no matter the result. The focus here is not on the baby, the "product," but on the woman's pregnancy and her social responsibility to reproduce. (This is a marked contrast to the U.S. "tentative pregnancy" in which some women postpone an announcement until they have completed the first trimester or until after receiving the results of amniocentesis.)

Second, it acknowledges that children emerge through a lengthy, gradual process that spans gestation and infancy and that any divisions imposed on the process (such as "trimesters," or "viability") are somewhat arbitrary.

The arbitrary nature of life-cycle divisions is evident, too, in national vital statistics and the registration standards as understood by the civil servant in San Gabriel. Birthrates and in-
Fetal mortality rates are unreliable in Ecuador, in part because the state began to emphasize the importance of registering births and deaths only in the mid-1980s. For example, in 1982 only 4,627 live births were registered in the country of more than 9 million inhabitants, while by 1986 the number of live births registered was 205,797. "Live birth" figures are an inherently imprecise category as long as they continue to include all children registered that year, including older children. Underreporting continues to be a problem, in part because relatively few births are attended by professionals. In 1986, 85 percent of the 1,406 registered live births in urban areas of Carchi Province (which includes San Gabriel) were attended by a professional, but in the rural areas only 50 percent of the 1,699 registered live births were attended by a professional. The reported infant mortality rate for the country as a whole in 1986 was 50.4/1,000 live births, while in Carchi Province it was 54.4/1,000. Actual rates are undoubtedly much higher, because parents have no particular incentive to register infant births or deaths, especially outside the cities.

Ecuador follows the World Health Organization in defining fetal death as "death prior to the complete expulsion or extraction from its mother of a product of conception, irrespective of the duration of the pregnancy; the death is indicated by the fact that after such separation the fetus does not breathe or show any other evidence of life, such as beating of the heart, pulsation of the umbilical cord, or definite movement of voluntary muscles." The 1986 Vital Statistics Report makes it clear that the Ecuadoran state does not even try to enumerate fetal death or miscarriage:

Fetal deaths: In Ecuador there is no special registry for reporting fetal deaths; when they occur and interested parties report them, an official of the Civil Registry should fill out a statistical report in duplicate, filing the original and sending the copy to the National Institute of Statistics and Census. In 1986 4,265 fetal deaths were registered [58 of which were in Carchi Province].

Even if the state were more aggressive about collecting these vital statistics, compliance in the hinterlands could not be guaranteed. The law specifies that all live births must be registered, but when I spoke with the civil servant in San Gabriel, he was quite casual about the regulations. In his opin-
ion, if an infant died within the first "four or six hours, or the first day" after birth, the parents did not need to register the birth, although they could if they wanted to. Although the lax registration standards could be regarded as a sign of bureaucratic inefficiency, they could also be interpreted as a codification of the imprecision described above. This particular official was reaffirming the liminality and arbitrariness that characterize the beginnings of life in the Ecuadoran Andes.

FETAL DEATH AND THE AMORPHOUS AUCA
The persistence of faith in the auca is perhaps the best evidence of the inherent ambiguity of the unborn in the rural highlands of Ecuador. The auca has long been a part of Andean ethnography, functioning as a master metaphor for the uncivilized and for several categories of quasi-person. Elsie Clews Parsons reported in 1945 that "[a]n infant (or anyone) dying unbaptized is called auca . . . and becomes a night-wandering spirit."22 In Quito, said Parsons, any unbaptized person was referred to as auca, including all the indigenous, non-Christian residents of the Amazonian lowlands. The Ecuadoran auca includes savages, heathens, and other liminal beings. A celebrated national soccer team embodies fierceness and invincibility, calling itself "Los Aucas," and Auca is still in use as a pejorative name for the Huaorani Indians of the Amazonian lowlands (oriente). Michael Taussig explains:

Several modern Ecuadorian Quechua dictionaries clearly bring the various meanings together—savage, seditious, rebel, enemy—and in the Colombian Putumayo today auca also connotes, to my friends at least and with varying intensities, the unrepentantly "other" world of savagery down there in the jungles of the oriente, a world quintessentially pagan, without Christ, Spanish words, or salt, inhabited by naked, incestuous, violent, magical, and monstrous people. . . .23

The infant aucas described to me in San Gabriel, like the savage Indian aucas described to Taussig, were frightening and potentially dangerous; they could, by some accounts, turn themselves into ghosts or cannibals. As one woman told me, "An auca comes looking for its mother, to punish her for being irresponsible, for having sinned by not baptizing him." Yet when I repeated this interpretation to another woman, she re-
jected it as falsó, falsó, falsó. Rather, she said, the auca makes itself into a big ghost, as tall as a tree, and looks for children to kill by eating their hearts. A third woman ridiculed this account, saying the auca does not pursue children, and no one can see it anyway, because it is just smoke. If there was any agreement about the nature of the auca in San Gabriel, most women agreed that it is the spirit of an aborted fetus, or stillborn or murdered baby, which cries pitifully at night in sorrow (por remordimiento) at not having been baptized. The cries emanate from the site where its body was supposedly discarded (botado) or thrown away without benefit of burial (tirado no más, donde sea). Four or five women told me of having heard the auca themselves, crying outside at night, and of their terror and prayers.

The existence of aucas was fairly widely recognized, but there was considerable disagreement about how properly to dispose of an unbaptized fetus or child to prevent it from becoming an auca. Luz María said that the auca can be prevented by baptizing a fetus or neonate even if it is dead; the mother or midwife can sprinkle holy water over its head and say, "In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize you, giving you the name of Jesus [for a boy] or María [for a girl]." But other women insisted that only living babies could receive baptism; the rite could not be posthumously conferred. Similar controversy arose over how and where to dispose of fetal remains.

The symbolism of burial space revealed a great deal about the ambiguous, wandering auca. Many women disapproved of discarding infant or fetal bodies without ceremony; however, some favored burial outside the cemetery for souls not destined to enter heaven. Others insisted that inside the cemetery was safer for both the living and the dead. Some suggested that fetal remains could be placed, above ground, along the inside of the cemetery fence, literally a liminal position on the outer margins of sacred ground. Another woman rejected burial altogether for the unbaptized: "To bury is bad (enterrar es malo). That child (niño) has been known to grow up by itself, to make itself into a ghost (fantasma). To keep it from becoming a ghost, it is better to put it in any little box and throw it into the river [because this is how Christ was baptized]. The priest said that way it can't do any harm." Although the river is a power-
ful salvation metaphor in Christian ideology, only one of the women I interviewed mentioned this method. There was little consensus about where the bodies belonged, where their souls would reside, or what their fate would be. The *auca* embodies uncertainty.

The inconsistent practice of other rituals that accompany birth and death, including naming, baptizing, and sitting with the body through a wake, further illustrate this ambiguity. I asked a sixty-five-year-old woman with six children to tell me, hypothetically, how a woman might feel and what she might do if she miscarried at six months' gestation.

Well, she would feel a little sad [*un poco de pena*] because she lost the child, without having known it, without having seen it, no? Then she would take it, because it is an object born of her [*como es un objeto que nace de uno*], with blood and everything, right? She would put it in a little box and bury it. Without a wake, they don't wake it [*no lo velan*]. Nor does she name it or baptize it.

Another woman had suffered two miscarriages: one at two months' gestation, another at eight months. The eight-month miscarriage was baptized, named, and buried in the cemetery. When the callous anthropologist inquired whether the fetus miscarried at two months would become an *auca* if deprived of baptism, I received a practical, if somewhat distressed, response: "But there's no way [to baptize it], it's just blood, how would you baptize it?" Unformed tissue cannot be properly baptized. But the women I interviewed seemed puzzled when I asked whether unformed tissue would, or could, become an *auca*; neither religion nor social practice offered any ready answer to this question. Thus the *auca* remains a relatively inchoate, subsocial being, a manifestation of discomfort with the prospect of unbaptized souls unable to gain entry into heaven. Its very iconography invokes murkiness: the *auca* is often described as cloudy or smoky or dark; as an *auca*, an unbaptized child "does not see the light [of heaven]" (*no ve la claridad*). The women of San Gabriel don't agree among themselves who becomes an *auca*, or under what circumstances, or what powers the *auca* might possess. Furthermore, they assert, there can be no satisfactory answer to these questions.

In Ecuadoran narratives of pregnancy, childbirth, and child death, the *auca* is invoked to signify the ever-present and in-
evitable ambiguity that accompanies the transitions into personhood. Interpreted in light of U.S. abortion debates, it appears that U.S. polemics have reduced, indeed virtually eliminated, the space that might be allotted to not-yet-persons. The auca, then, can be seen as an affirmation of a place for quasi-persons within the local cosmology. The auca accommodates those anomalous, liminal beings who exist somewhere between nothingness and full human personhood, and it reinforces the notion that mortal humans do not exercise complete control over the spiritual agency of the unborn. The auca, as part of the local practice of personhood, functions to remind Andean residents of the fragility and spiritual ambiguity of young human life and of the importance of baptism. The auca shapes the meanings attributed to the unborn and to babies who die prematurely or without church protection, and it wields a coercive power over those who believe in it by forcing them to think and act in accordance with local practices. To this extent, the auca could be considered a political actor with a bit part, influencing local reproductive ethics.

Because the social practices surrounding fetal and infant burial provided such insights into their status, I was interested to compare burial practices for fetal remains in San Gabriel with those in Quito. I asked the chief of perinatology at a Quito hospital what happens to the remains when a woman miscarries in his hospital. Do the parents ever claim the remains for burial? Of the abortions [de los abortos], the parents never claim the remains. Yes, if it's a stillbirth, or if it dies of some disease, but even with these children many times parents don't claim [reclamar]. But with abortions, never, ever. And we don't give them the remains. Never. When it's a formed fetus, when it's already a child, then yes [cuando ya es un feto ya formado, cuando ya es un niño allí sí].

His response was telling: in urban areas miscarried fetal tissue is not claimed or socially valued. But his response also complicates matters. He used the word aborto to refer to early miscarriages and induced abortions, apparently not distinguishing between them. But then he used feto and niño seemingly interchangeably to refer to the formed fetus/baby at a later stage of gestation. He thus made a distinction between "formed" and "unformed" tissue and granted to the former a moral and social identity (in death as in life?) not extended to the latter.
The same physician went on to tell me about the difficulty encountered by his staff in obtaining permission to perform autopsies on fetuses and babies. Many parents, he says, would rather pay a private physician to sign the death certificate than sign the hospital-issued death certificate which automatically authorizes autopsy. Parents are opposed, he said, to having autopsies performed, although he purported not to understand their reasoning: "I really don't understand them in this sense. The only thing I can think of is that they don't want the child dismembered (despedazado). But we don't dismember during an autopsy. And even if we did take the heart for study, the parents would never know because we stitch up the chest cavity." The traffic in body parts he seemed to condone was probably as clear to bereaved parents as it was to me. His words, however, revealed something more than his willingness to deceive. Physical integrity and wholeness is important to the parents, because bodily mutilation is a sin.

**ABORTION: SELF- VS. OTHER-MUTILATION**

Most rural women answered my query with, "Yes, the fetus is a person from conception." By this they meant that God creates pregnancies and brings babies into being and that at some unspecifiable point during gestation God gives the fetus a soul. Because mortals do not know precisely when this happens, it is better to err on the generous side. Fetuses are "persons" from conception, then, because God made them but not because the community yet accepts them as such.

The women were equally adamant that it is (usually) wrong to induce abortion but not because abortion is "murder." They explained that induced abortion is a sin of self-mutilation. The horror of inducing abortion, I was told, was the blasphemous presumptuousness implied in taking one's bodily fate into one's own hands (siendo rey de su propia sangre). God calls pregnancy into existence, they said, and we are not authorized to interfere with His divine plans. Abortion, then, is not about the mutilation or destruction of a person but about presuming to know God's will. The link between the personhood of the fetus and the morality of abortion—so omnipresent in contemporary North American culture—is largely absent in Ecuador.
Furthermore, several women told me that a decision to terminate a pregnancy could sometimes be morally defensible if women were in desperate straits. Moral justifications for abortion included abandonment by or abuse at the hands of a partner or husband; desperate poverty, hunger, or homelessness; life-threatening contraceptive failure (such as conceiving with an IUD in place); or the need to protect a family's honor. Even if the fetus is a person, I was told, this does not mean that abortion is necessarily wrong in all circumstances. Discussions about the morality of abortion tended to center around the social, economic, and health circumstances facing pregnant women, who were portrayed as the final moral arbiters in reproductive decisions. These discussions tended not to invoke church doctrine; nor were they framed in terms of fetal rights, fetal personhood, or maternal-fetal conflict. The rhetoric around abortion in Ecuador emphasizes the centrality of pregnant women's moral integrity and life circumstances, rather than fetal rights or personification of the unborn.

**GESTATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Pregnant women in the United States have access to books, posters in physicians' offices, and even plastic models depicting an inexorable and cumulative process of gestational development through which an embryo turns into a fetus and then a baby. These visual models and books are part of a cultural iconography that helps to fix an image and create the meanings attached to particular gestational stages. In the rural highlands of Ecuador there is no equivalent to this visual or technologically based information. Women learn about intrauterine fetal development from their own experiences, talking with other women, viewing their own or other women's miscarriages, and feeling fetal movement. The terminology the women use is revealing because it blurs the distinction between the unborn and the born: criatura (creature) or its diminutive, criaturita; also nene or guagua (baby), niño (child), or venidero (one to come), or, rarely, bebe. The unborn are not referred to in gendered terms, although, as we see below, the process of intrauterine development is considered different for girls and for boys.
The most significant marker of gestational development, women told me, is formación. In this context the word refers to the time when the fetus assumes a recognizably human form, but the word formación also, interestingly, means "education," drawing a parallel between gestational development and the socialization of children. When does formación happen? Accounts varied widely, implying that there is no cultural consensus or ready response apart from the gender differentiation many said was inherent in the process: males develop earlier than females. Doña Blanca washed her laundry while we talked. Thirty-three years old, she had six living children and one daughter who had died at age two. She explained, "Males, they say, form at one month [gestation]. In contrast, females still aren't formed at two months. Females form later (la mujer se forma de más meses)." Doña Teresa, a forty-nine-year-old illiterate woman with eight living and three deceased children, answered my question about formación by talking about quickening: "I usually felt them move at three months. And when it's female, around six months, it seems, no?" She smiled slyly and explained, "They say girls are lazy (vaga)." A fifty-nine-year-old mother of twenty-two, Doña Ileana said that boys begin to form at two weeks' gestational age, and girls begin to form at six months. Doña María, aged seventy, explained what her son looked like when she suffered a miscarriage at three months' gestation, because she had witnessed a woman slaughter a pig.

I arrived home. I began shivering and drooling. That night I started bleeding profusely. The little boy (varoncito) was born perfect. He was about this big [indicating about three inches]. He was born completely formed, with all the boy's parts. The miscarried female (hembrita) has nothing, she is just a chunk of flesh (trozo de sangre), and in the middle of the chunk of flesh there is a single eye. That's the female. Females form at six months. Males form by the first month. Females, no. The female comes out with a chicken's eye. Nothing more.

Doña Josefina, age sixty-two with six children, explained that formación took place at two months in boys, "just like Christ," and that girls remained "like chunks of meat" for a "long time." Observation and personal experience of miscarriage seemed not to affect the social perception that girls form more slowly than boys. The common wisdom about gender differentiation had little practical value, because a pregnant woman in the
Ecuadoran highlands does not profess to know whether the fetus she carries is destined to be female or male. But formación can affect the morality of abortion, according to Doña Josefina, because an unformed conceptus can, if necessary, be aborted:

Here abortion is a crime. It’s not a crime, though, when the child (niño) is not yet in flesh (cuando todavía no esté en sangre), when it is not yet formed with the blood of the mother, no? It's still just a few days [from conception], no? Then they say that it's made up of sex substances (la naturaleza)–from both sides–and that it's still in water (todavía está en agua), no? It's still not formed, nor is it made of flesh. Then they say that it [abortion] is permitted, that it is not a sin. But once it's formed, once it's formed of one's blood, then it [abortion] is a crime.

The "unformed fetus" might be the Ecuadoran equivalent of saying that a woman can be "a little bit pregnant." Because formación could happen so early, a woman who wants to terminate a pregnancy should do so as early as possible. Doña Teresa told me: "Of course earlier is better. Preferred, for example, in the case of unmarried women who find themselves pregnant, to do it at one month. At one month. That's like 'bringing down the period' (bajando la regla). There is not yet any fetus (feto), no one, nothing." 27

The importance of formación was not shared by all the women I interviewed. Some said that abortion was always wrong, whenever it occurred. Doña Ileana disagreed about the emphasis on formación, explaining that the unborn "has a right to life" (tiene derecho a la vida; she was unique among the women I interviewed in San Gabriel in using this language) "by virtue of the fact that it is in the womb, even if it is only one or two months old it is already alive." This disagreement recalls debates ongoing elsewhere about the sanctity of life versus the social significance of personhood. Here, however, the disagreement occurs within a cultural repertoire that can accommodate a wide degree of variability on the question of when personhood might coalesce.

Not only does formación not happen all at once, but the physical and spiritual characteristics of newborns are still fluid and changing up until birth and well into the postpartum period. Newborns, like fetuses, were referred to by terms that indicated their unfinished quality: tierno means young or unripe, and is used also to describe green fruit. 28 Doña Josefina told
A newborn child (guagua recién nacido) is like a child of clay." She explained that the mother should carefully and frequently mold and shape its face and nose, its head and shoulders and legs to make them assume the desired shape. Women swaddle their babies, she said, to make their legs grow straight. Just as their bodies are unfinished and malleable, the spirits and souls of newborns are not yet firmly tethered to the social world. Babies are described as particularly vulnerable to collective social and supernatural forces that older children are toughened against. For example, babies are susceptible to fright (susto), evil eye (mal ojo), dew, night air, rainbows, inauspicious hours (mala hora), and traditionally dangerous places such as ravines. For this reason, said Doña María, it used to be the custom for new mothers to stay inside with their babies for forty days after birth (the traditional Latin American cuarentena, called the dieta in San Gabriel). Until recently, a postpartum mother would be enshrouded by a toldo, or screen, over the bed. "The toldita was a sheet that was put over the bed so that wind (viento) would not get in, is what they used to say. Only this little tiny opening would be left so you could get into the bed, nothing more." The toldo prevented dangerous airs from reaching the child. It also served as the Ecuadoran variant of the "social womb" familiar to anthropologists. The social womb extends the physiological womb symbolically into social space, thus rendering biological birth as a necessary but insufficient condition for granting personhood. The infant and mother live inside the "social womb" for a time, until the infant is deemed "person enough," ripe enough or tough enough, to emerge. Sometimes the social womb was the bed where mother and newborn lay enshrouded, whereas sometimes the social womb was the entire house. Doña María said she kept her baby in the house for two months after it was born, to prevent harm from befalling the child. "Sometimes," she explained, "I would have to pass through a ravine (quebra-da) or overgrown area (monte). The child’s spirit could get lost, stay behind in those places" (que se queda el espíritu). If she had to go out, she would leave the child behind in the house, where it would be safe even if unattended.
BUILDING PERSONS IS A WOMAN'S RESPONSIBILITY

The physical separation of the fetus from the mother at birth is one important step in the process of acquiring personhood, but newborns continue to be dependent on their parents to provide spiritual sustenance and physical strength. Fathers, as well as mothers, are held accountable for safeguarding fetuses and newborns in several ways. They must respond immediately to pregnant women's cravings (antojos), abstain from sexual relations for the forty-day postpartum period (dieta), and remain faithful to their wives (especially while children are at the breast). One of the most feared infant diseases in San Gabriel is colerín, which results when a father upsets his wife. Her anger or rage (cólera), passed immediately to the child through breastmilk, results in colerín, an acute, incurable disease which kills rapidly. "Don't you see that they're unripe (tierni-tos), and they can't take it (no aguantan), they can't withstand colerín." Because the consequences of rage can be so grave, the prospect of rage might well give pregnant women and nursing mothers some degree of control over inappropriate male behavior.29

Apart from these rather limited responsibilities, however, men absent themselves from the sufferings of birth, miscarriage, and infant death. Here a Quito pathologist gradually reveals his conscious insensitivity to the death of his firstborn.

When a newborn dies, the most affected person is not the father, it's the mother. The person with whom you have to work—to console—is the mother, not the father. The father comes to accept his responsibilities gradually, as the child develops. I'm not the least bit afraid to say this, and I've always said it to my family, in my home. My first son died. I did not feel [his emphasis] what my wife felt. I think if the same thing happened right now to one of my [older] children, the calamity would fall hardest on me.

His honest confession illustrates a point made by Laurie Price in her discussion of Ecuadorian ideologies of the family. She writes that women are encouraged "to feel fully the anguish of a calamity that befalls a family member but [the ideologies do] not prepare men either psychologically or socially to acknowledge that kind of anguish."30 For the purposes of our discussion, this gendered distinction illustrates the extent to which women are primarily responsible for the reproduction of the social order, for bringing children into social being.

Andie L. Knutson once concluded, with respect to the United
States, that "people are made by people."31 In the highlands of Ecuador, the work of making people, of constructing social persons, is specifically considered women's work. Women "serve as cultural mediators between the living and the dead"32 but also between the world of the not-yet and the existing social community. Men do not feel the same degree of responsibility for ushering children into social existence, although, as noted above, women want their partners' support and work hard to recruit them to the task of bringing babies into being. When women attempt to control men's behavior through devices such as pena (emotional pain and suffering)33 and the prospect of children dying from colerin, they do so knowing that men would otherwise not readily concern themselves with assisting quasi-persons on the margins of life.34

**PRACTICING PERSONHOOD**

The ideologies and actions practiced by women in highland Ecuador militate against the radical individualization of fetuses currently underway in the United States. Yet much to the chagrin and consternation of U.S. feminists and prochoice activists, the abortion debate continues to revolve around the question of whether the fetus is a person. Devised by prolife activists to direct attention to their cause, the question is a trope in an era where definitions of personhood are increasingly based on popular appropriations of biology and genetics.35 In other words, the answer must always be "yes" where personhood is defined with recourse to unified biological or genetic descriptions alleged to lie outside or prior to social attributes. The question reinforces the absolutist conviction that science can identify biological markers (such as the onset of brain stem activity) or invent medical interventions (such as lung surfactants to enable very premature babies to survive) that will influence decisions about when fetuses should be regarded as persons. Scientific investigation of this sort reinforces the presumption that biomedical insights are attainable, relevant, and consensual, even while the popular appropriations of science divert attention from the processes through which science is imbued with meaning and signification.

A focus on the onset of fetal personhood both presupposes
and reasserts that the morality of abortion is and should be contingent on the status of the fetus. Of course many North Americans, including most feminists, reject the logic that links abortion to fetal personhood. Yet for the purposes of this article, it is useful to point out that even prochoice ideologies in the United States resist the notion of quasi-persons, semipersons, or incipient persons. U.S. ideologies favor a strict distinction between persons and nonpersons, with nothing in-between.36 In this sense the Ecuadoran example presents an alternative view of the unborn and raises a series of questions about the U.S. context. What is the cultural basis for the absolutist assertion that fetuses must always be either full persons or nonpersons? When did this absolutist imperative emerge? Did the social and political effacement of pregnant women predate the introduction and widespread use of reproductive imaging technologies? Might some pregnancies involve fetal "persons" (if pregnant women and others involved grant them this status), but other pregnancies might not? Perhaps some pregnancies involve incipient or quasi-persons of indeterminate moral, spiritual, and physical status. Certainly the Ecuadoran women I interviewed would not suggest that any society could accurately or confidently pinpoint the beginning of the miraculous, mysterious process of social becoming.

Much of the U.S. debate over abortion has centered around identifying the most defensible moment at which personhood can or should be assigned. People often presume that personhood accrues cumulatively; fetuses and babies gradually acquire additional degrees of personhood, but persons generally do not come undone. Personhood is easily extended but rarely rescinded. It is thus difficult for North Americans to understand that the practices of personhood in the Ecuadoran highlands sometimes allow a degree of ebb and flow over the duration of pregnancy and infancy.37 Women told me that the gradual process of intrauterine formación, for example, may be arrested or even reversed if a pregnant woman knowingly continues to breastfeed an older child. By showing inappropriate favoritism and diverting energy essential for fetal growth, she may "undo" the nascent personhood of the unborn. A criatura said to be formed (and thus una persona) by six months' gestation may be said at birth to be "little more than an animal"
until it is baptized. The trajectory of personhood need not necessarily be linear, because people cannot predict the many influences that bring each person into being. "God keeps certain secrets," people told me, and these things He does not tell us. Incipient personhood is understood as openly ambiguous and variable, its character perennially liminal, amorphous, and irresolvable.

Persons are everywhere the products of social action. In Ecuador at the early margins of life, social practices do not focus on personification of the unborn or reification of fetal subjects. The women I interviewed in San Gabriel have not been schooled, as I have, to imagine individualized, disembodied, animate, technicolor fetuses brought to consciousness through the popularization of science. Nor do their journalists constantly remind them, as mine do me, how contentious and violent abortion politics have become. The women I interviewed in San Gabriel were perplexed that I, or my compatriots, would expect to find a single or satisfactory answer to the question of when fetuses become persons. Why, they wondered, would we press so hard to know the unknowable? Through their eyes, I began to see their ways as sensible and my own as strange. These women imagine the unborn in a variety of ways, including as amorphous quasi-human entities with strong links to spiritual and social (as well as biological) domains. They bring the unborn into social being slowly and carefully, not by medical or legal fiat, but through a combination of overlapping personal, social, and religious actions. These include taking good care of pregnant women, baptizing children, respecting God's will and authority, working and hoping for prosperity, behaving responsibly and working together, protecting the incipient person from natural and supernatural threats and evil influences, and a good bit of luck. Women's stories about their miscarriages and children (both alive and dead) were interspersed with stories of aucas and cautionary remarks about the dangers of wind and night air, and the hardships posed by infidelity and poverty. All these examples serve to emphasize the radical disjunctures between their liminal unborn and "my fetus," the fetus I inadvertently reify myself, steeped as I am in my country's scientific images linked to abortion debates. This comparison thus denaturalizes the iconographic fetal subject in the United States.
and raises a question. Wouldn't U.S. feminists do well to attend to the diverse social practices through which people create people, including the ways in which scientific images are mobilized politically to mask women's authority, responsibility, and moral integrity?

NOTES

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3. A few caveats are warranted at the outset. Cross-cultural comparison can be a useful heuristic tool, but it carries certain risks. One is the danger of reifying "culture," of representing as uniform the views of "a people" which are more accurately depicted as divergent and highly contested. Another pitfall is a tendency to overemphasize similarities within groups while exaggerating contrasts between them. If I contrast "us" and "them" in this essay, I do so deliberately, aware of the representational problems I invoke, but equally convinced that comparison can be a powerful pedagogical and theoretical tool.


sonification of the fetal subject, "The couple is expecting a son, Palmer Taipale, in March." I thank Rachel Roth for bringing the clipping to my attention.
9. I might add that the multiple venues through which fetuses are created include the rhetoric that feminist scholars employ to remark on and to contest the emergence of fetal subjects.
13. Centro de Estudios y Asesoría en Salud (CEAS), "La crisis, la mujer, y el aborto" (Quito, Ecuador: Centro de Estudios y Asesoría en Salud, 1985). See also Alan Guttmacher Institute.
15. Ximena Costales P., "El aborto: Repercusiones sociales de una drama individual" (Quito: Centro de Investigaciones y Apoyo a la Mujer, unpublished ms).
23. Michael Taussig, Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 97. A physician in Quito reported that some people on the coast of Ecuador refer to unbaptized babies as moritos, or Moors, from the colonial Spanish equivalent for "heathen."
24. Perhaps the "not-yet-person" exists in the realm of infertility in the United States, where images abound of "our child" who is not yet conceived. See Margarete


29. Thanks to Rayna Rapp for suggesting this interpretation.


34. That the work of creating persons is stratified according to gender can also explain why *aucas* weigh so heavily on a mother's conscience, because mothers hold themselves principally responsible for having their children baptized. Women often said that newborns are not full persons prior to baptism: "Not children of God," said one Ecuadoran woman; "More like puppies than persons," said another. A newborn baby, the women told me, does not become a full person until it is welcomed into the Christian community through baptism.

