

Jennifer Scuro

*The Pregnancy [does-not-equal] Childbearing Project: A Phenomenology of Miscarriage*  
London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017 (ISBN: 9781786602923)

*Reviewed by Amy Reed-Sandoval, 2018*

**Amy Reed-Sandoval** is an assistant professor of philosophy and affiliated faculty member in the Center for Inter-American and Border Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso. Her current research is concerned with the ethics of borders and immigration, reproductive bioethics, and Latin American philosophy. Some of her recent work has appeared in the *Journal of Social Philosophy*, *Public Affairs Quarterly*, and *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*.

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Will Eisner is said to have introduced the graphic novel in 1978 with the publication of *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, which told the story of a group of working-class, Jewish characters who all lived in the same New York City tenement. He coined the term, it is said, to convince publishers to move forward with his work; he wanted to distinguish it from a "mere" comic book. Since then, educators and scholars have increasingly come to the defense of the artistic, literary, intellectual, and pedagogical value of the graphic novel. Eileen Richardson explains that "graphic novels are *more than just stories with pictures*; they have engaging illustrations that help readers infer the emotions of characters as well as more fully understand the twists and turns within the plot" (Richardson 2017, 24; my emphasis).

There has also been considerable celebration of the value of graphic novels to social-justice teaching and activism. In "Graphic Novels Offer Diverse Perspectives, Narratives," Pam Watts writes that "as with comic books, the dramatic impact of these visual texts lends itself to subject matter related to struggle, conflict, injustice, and other highly emotional topics" (Watts 2015, 40). Kenneth T. Carano and Jeremiah Clabough explore the particular benefits of exposing students to graphic novels that deal with human-rights violations. Examples include the graphic novel *Maus*, which explores dimensions of both the Holocaust and the experience of Holocaust survival; *Footnotes in Gaza*, which chronicles the 1956 massacre by Israeli forces of approximately 385 Palestinians in Gaza; *War Brothers: The Graphic Novel*, which tells the story of a group of Ugandan children abducted and forcibly conscripted as soldiers in the Lord's Resistance Army; and *March Book Two*, which explores John Lewis's work in the Civil Rights Movement (Carano and Clabough 2016). They argue that graphic novels "allow students to empathize with the human toll taken by human rights violations. Students are able to better internalize the impact of events on individuals through the images and texts of a graphic novel" (17).

The year 2017 turned out to be an important year for explicitly *philosophical* graphic novels, with several philosophers adopting it as a medium for the expression of philosophical questions, history, and ideas. For instance, Stephen Nadler and Ben Nadler collaboratively penned *Heretics!: The Wonderful (and Dangerous) Beginnings of Modern Philosophy*, which depicts not only the most significant philosophical ideas, but also the lives of prominent philosophers who

ignited so much controversy in the seventeenth century. (Alas, I lack the requisite talent to provide here the sort of "graphic review of a graphic philosophy book" that Adam Ferner artfully produced in his review of that book [Ferner 2017]). Add to this the book that is the focus of this review: Jennifer Scuro's important, and very "experimental," *The Pregnancy [does-not-equal] Childbearing Project: A Phenomenology of Miscarriage*.

Scuro states from the outset that she wants to "identify this project as a feminist phenomenological project--at least in method--yet, ultimately, it is experimental as to what it might yield." She adds that "philosophical analysis is not usually traditional fare for feminism and feminist critique; few philosophers deal in--much less construct narrative in--the form of the graphic novel" (ix). The narrative that Scuro shares is that of her own experiences of miscarriage and abortion--in both cases for "wanted" pregnancies (a category that is complicated in Scuro's story). She also explains that her graphic novel is an attempt to "speak to what had come to pass," as well as "a token of epistemic reparation for what I had undergone and for what almost completely undid me" (180).

Those immediately skeptical of the employment of the graphic novel for philosophical analysis purposes should pause to consider two things about the nature of Scuro's philosophical project. First, note that miscarriage is not only undertheorized in the realm of philosophy (with some important exceptions, such the contents of the 2015 special issue of the *Journal of Social Philosophy* entitled "Miscarriage, Reproductive Loss, and the Meaning of Fetal Death" [Cahill, Norlock, and Stoles 2015]), but also deeply stigmatized and "swept under the carpet" in US society. It is obviously difficult to philosophize about that which we regularly refuse to talk about, and consequently struggle to visualize and understand. Scuro's use of the medium of the graphic novel--which contains vivid illustrations of things like dark, alarmingly heavy blood in underwear, the author's facial expressions of grief and trauma while she is gazing out of hospital beds, and the vulnerable huddle of her pregnancy-loss support group--puts *readers' faces* (quite literally!) *directly* in front of that from which we have been socially conditioned to turn away. In this sense, Scuro's graphic novel forces the reader to philosophically engage a theme that, due to stigmatization, remains all too elusive and opaque for the purpose of philosophical analysis. (Scuro even recalls being asked, at a philosophy conference on pregnancy, what miscarriage has to do with philosophy.)

Second, note that Scuro presents this work as a disruptive *phenomenological description* that takes as its starting point lived experiences of miscarriage rather than a "standard" philosophical argument about pregnancy, miscarriage, and abortion. The graphic novel, as a medium, seems particularly suited to this specific aim. Indeed, I believe, in light of the recent history of the graphic novel--particularly its connections to social-justice pedagogy and activism--that philosophers should be open to the question of what the medium of the graphic novel can do *for philosophy* (see Brokenshire 2015).

The book is organized in terms of an introduction and four parts, the longest of which is the graphic novel, and the rest of which takes the form of more "traditional" philosophical text. In the introduction to the book, Scuro states her intention to "disentangle the phenomenon of pregnancy from the phenomenon of miscarriage, supported by a narrative of personal experience as best as I could recall it" (ix). She further explains:

When you have been raised and groomed to believe that pregnancy is equivalent to--if not also inherently entailing--the phenomena of labor, childbirth, and motherhood wrapped up in a mythos of unconditional love and desire, anything short of these expectations becomes a site of harm and humiliation (ix).

She says she wants to focus on the "quality of *expellation*" given to all pregnancy (xii), emphasizing the oft-ignored fact that *all pregnancies* carry a risk of miscarriage. She also raises two fascinating questions for ensuing analysis: (1) given that pregnancies are all open to miscarriage, and given that all pregnancies contain the quality of expellation, "can't there be grief in birth?" and (2) "doesn't all postpartum experience share in the experience of miscarriage in a deep and fundamental way?" (xii). Scuro wants to "shut down the idea" that miscarriage is a woman's fault, as well as the idea that bearing children should be regarded as an "accomplishment." Disentangling pregnancy from childbearing seems to be a promising avenue for beginning to address these varied ideas and questions.

Part I of the book, "Miscarriage or Abortion?" (Or, #shoutingmyabortion in a Graphic Novel)," is the graphic novel itself. Let me note that a great deal of the "power" of Scuro's carefully crafted narrative is generated by the illustrations that accompany the text. I therefore cannot do justice to Scuro's story through words alone. In brief, though, Scuro's graphic novel tells aspects of the stories of two pregnancy losses and two "successful" pregnancies (although Scuro disputes such phrasing); in other words, pregnancies that resulted in the live birth of a child. We read, and see, that Scuro's first pregnancy loss took the form of a blighted ovum diagnosed at her six-week prenatal visit. This was followed by the "successful" birth of her daughter, and then a subsequent pregnancy. This third pregnancy threatened her life, compelling her to seek an abortion to save herself (note, though, that she takes care to distinguish "good" from "bad" abortions). This pregnancy was replete with doctor visits, extended stays at the hospital, familial challenges, and Scuro's increasingly deep depression and despair. Close to the end of the graphic novel, Scuro illustrates/writes of weeping openly at a philosophy conference during which she discussed her miscarriage. She narrates that "my fellow panelists and some audience members wept too. It was empowering and humbling" (165).

A very short Part II, "An Interlude on Philosophical Allegory"--subtitled "What 'Counts' as Philosophy"--is, Scuro suggests, the "conceptual glue" binding the graphic novel to the theorizing of Part III (179). Wanting to philosophize about pregnancy without "childbearing ideologies" (180), and hoping that allegory is an appropriate vehicle for that task, she highlights the art required for interpreting allegories by discussing Plato's use of analogy in *The Republic*. Seeing the metanoic (transformative) potential in allegory, she challenges the "spell of neoliberalism" as one of the debilitating ideologies that demands the collapse of the concept of "pregnancy" into the assumption of "having a baby" (181). Rejecting neoliberalism as relevant to her self-concept, but acknowledging its hold on how she is defined through her body, Scuro admits to a political agenda of her own: that those who do the most labor in relation to imagining, defining and experiencing pregnancy be in charge of the shaping (transforming) of an understanding of "the purposefulness of pregnancy" so that what "success" and "failure" mean in this context are not imposed from outside (186).

In Part III, "A Phenomenological Reading of Miscarriage," Scuro employs the work of Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida to develop an alternative to what she calls a "childbearing teleology" that ignores the "existentialia" of the pregnant body in favor of a dominant societal narrative about pregnancy and childbearing (189). This problematic "childbearing teleology," she notes, appears only to account for so-called "successful" pregnancies that result in the live birth of children. Pregnancy is only significant--in fact, it is only *visible*--inasmuch as it has this particular purpose. Meanwhile, Scuro argues, "there is very little meaning or ritual granted to the experience of miscarriage, except in the negation--as a 'failed pregnancy'" (189). This has served to *silence* "the phenomenological content of miscarriage" (192). In place of this childbearing teleology of pregnancy, Scuro proposes a nonteleological approach to pregnancy that would remove the sense of *expectation* from pregnancy. In all pregnancies, she argues, "the self is emptied out." She calls this "emptying out given to all pregnant bodies" "death-within-the-self" (196).

Scuro ends her book in Part IV, "Griefwork: How Do You Get Over What You Cannot Get Over," by defending and explicating the sort of griefwork that miscarriage entails as "an undergoing and not merely an overcoming--as a resource and a reserve of invisible labor" (237). She argues that given that all pregnancy entails an expellation for the pregnant woman/person, "the rupture will ultimately require work, or else she will become undone" (238). She argues that this is why we need to disentangle pregnancy from childbearing. Doing so will open up possibilities for rendering intelligible the experiences that cause such grief--and for undertaking the complicated sort of griefwork that they often require.

*The Pregnancy [does-not-equal] Childbearing Project* challenges us in several ways. First, it challenges us to rethink (or continue to rethink) what "counts" as philosophical work. If one approaches this book as a "standard philosophical text," one will undoubtedly crave more philosophical argument in defense of the many fascinating and provocative claims that Scuro makes over the course of the text. Of course, as we have seen, Scuro anticipates this type of reaction from the outset. Furthermore, she is wonderfully unapologetic in pushing disciplinary boundaries in graphic novel form. This stylistic boldness is, in my opinion, one of the best features of this book--making it a potentially rejuvenating read (despite the difficulty of the topic) for both teachers and students of philosophy.

Second, this book challenges us to think deeply about miscarriage, a very common and philosophically rich phenomenon that is problematically undertheorized and misunderstood. Scuro is to be applauded for taking up this topic directly, and dealing with it in sustained, unapologetic, book-length form. And finally, Scuro's proposals that we not only disentangle pregnancy from miscarriage, but also understand pregnancy in terms of expellation and possible death, clearly run contrary to the dominant social narrative or *pregnancy-as-expectation* that only contains room for so-called "successful pregnancies." Her view also renders visible the ways in which all kinds of abortions (including so-called "elective abortions") are also experienced *as pregnancies*--rendering the project choice-friendly and potentially empowering for women/people who seek abortions. Scuro's proposals thus challenge social conventions, inviting philosophical response.

In addition to being of interest to philosophers working in the areas of bioethics, phenomenology, and feminist philosophy, this book could work well in an undergraduate bioethics course, given the ways in which it provokes questions, discussion, debate, and understanding. I will also add, drawing upon personal experience, that this book makes for excellent reading for those who have personally experienced miscarriages. I was drawn to it after experiencing two difficult pregnancy losses, the second of which occurred about a year before I saw Scuro's text. While I am still considering, on an abstract/philosophical level, the scope and consequences of Scuro's "pregnancy-as-expellation" view, I have nevertheless found this book nourishing and comforting. Indeed, I wish I had had it sooner, during the most difficult moments of my miscarriages. In sum, although Scuro's methodology is boundary-pushing and likely to strike some as controversial, I consider *The Pregnancy [does-not-equal] Childbearing Project* to be an important, challenging, and urgently needed philosophical work.

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