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## ARTICLES

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### **Pregnant Pain and Power: Border Crossings in Mike Bartlett's *Earthquakes in London***

Pregnancy is only rarely to be seen in contemporary British drama. Whether this is due to long-standing taboos surrounding the pregnant body, which has long been marginalised as "both a reminder of our material origins and a signifier of the (uncertain) future" (Hanson 2004, 14), or whether there are other factors at play, such as a still male-dominated theatre landscape, is impossible to say. Even when pregnancy does feature prominently in a play, for example in Mike Bartlett's *Earthquakes in London* (2010) or Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* (2011), there is a tendency in criticism to focus on its metaphorical potential – in these two plays as image of the future in connection with the climate catastrophe – rather than on its concrete material and social consequences for the pregnant person. The following reading of *Earthquakes in London* seeks to counterbalance this and places a focus on the protagonist's experience of fear and pain in pregnancy and on the way the play reacts to pregnancy's socio-cultural configurations.

In public, pregnancy is frequently seen as an event with broad social implications while the pregnant person's bodily and psychological investment tends to be neglected. While many people experience pregnancy as a fulfilling and wonderful time, the far-reaching changes in the body that pregnancy brings about may also lead to feelings of vulnerability, pain and fear. Within Western cultures pregnancy is often associated with birth fear, which weakens the position of the pregnant individual. In particular, deep-rooted gender stereotypes that are projected onto pregnant persons, such as "the identification and elevation of fearfulness as a 'natural' feminine trait, informed by the cultures and practices of modern Western maternity culture and reinforced through the multiple channels of social life" (Sweetman 2018, 17), shape the cultural understanding of pregnancy. What is more, pregnant individuals experience the crossing of several bodily, social and psychological borders: the skin can no longer function as a separating organ between the inner and the outer world of a pregnant person and at the same time personal boundaries and privacy are violated – in favour of the foetus. During pregnancy, the body is thus exposed to various forms of social and cultural change, as Clare Hanson observes:

[...] the pregnant body (itself arguably a form of double embodiment) is doubly mutable. It is mutable in the obvious sense that it undergoes continuous physiological (and sometimes pathological) change, and mutable culturally, in that it is viewed through constantly shifting interpretive frameworks. (Hanson 2004, 3)

This shifting of frameworks can be seen from the fact that, starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the voice of the foetus has been increasingly strengthened, not least through Lars Nilsson's 1965 photographs of a foetus in the womb in *A Child is Born: The Drama of Life Before Birth*. These photographs not only separate foetus and pregnant individual (see Hartouni 1997, 67; see also Hologa 2012), but they also take away the privacy of this relationship; pregnancy has become a performance, creating a "public foetus" (Duden 1993, 50). This focus on the foetus in Western cultures and the simultaneous neglect of the pregnant person's perspective have increasingly led to a weakened sense of subjectivity of pregnant individuals, as their "experiences of birth are defined through their bodies, their subjecthood stealthily replaced by their state as an inhabited subject" (Sweetman 2018, 18). The erosion of subjectivity may then coincide with states of pain or fear (Young 2005, 55) that constitute a further crossing of mental or physiological borders. Pregnant individuals, then, are caught between these individual psychological states and the social expectations around pregnancy that influence them.

This amalgamation of bodily and mental challenges such as fear and pain, as well as attendant social expectations during pregnancy are central to *Earthquakes in London*. The play has often been placed in the category of climate change fiction or cli-fi plays (see, for example, Angelaki 2017; Barleet 2020; Billington 2010; Bottoms 2012; Hudson 2012) and has been called a "big, epic, expansive play about climate change, corporate corruption, fathers and children" (Billington 2010) – a description from which pregnancy or motherhood are notably absent. Instead, my analysis focuses on the protagonist Freya's pregnancy and her struggle in a patriarchal society. While this play in many ways replicates female subjectivity during pregnancy as fearful and dependent (see Sweetman 2018, 19), Freya's struggle against the authoritative instructions imposed from the outside world is an important step to highlight these oppressive power structures in the first place. In *Earthquakes in London*, feelings of fear and pain are imposed upon the pregnant protagonist on several levels and are linked to a shift in the inner- and interpersonal boundaries of her body, mind and world. Together with the inexpressibility of said pain, this leads to Freya fleeing into a world of hallucinations and thus comments on the erosion of subjectivity in pregnancy. In Bartlett's play these negative feelings are imposed upon Freya on three different levels: first, by the people around her; second, by the unborn child within her; and third, by her own body and mind. These three levels take shape in different aesthetics: while the feelings imposed on the protagonist by others are like a circle surrounding her and the (physical) movements and the (projected) emotions of the child within her are piercing and recurring reminders of the impending change in her life, her own thoughts and feelings are like a spiral constantly revolving around the same topics. The depiction of pain in Bartlett's play highlights the inexpressibility of oppressive power relations and unrealistic expectations women<sup>1</sup> are experiencing, especially during pregnancy.

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1 Although much of the existing research on pregnancy focuses on (cis-)women, the theoretical considerations of this article are relevant in the same way for all individuals who can become pregnant, but do not identify as women, including trans-men and non-binary individuals. However, *Earthquakes in London* has a pregnant cis-woman as its protagonist and provides

Drawing on Sara Ahmed, Iris Marion Young and Julia Kristeva, the following analysis of the power relations and neglect of individuality surrounding pregnancy in *Earthquakes in London* will exemplarily show in which ways contemporary drama reflects both aesthetically and contextually on pain during pregnancy, and, in doing so, it will expose oppressive relations of power that need to be demolished in order to "support an empowered experience of pregnancy and birth" (Sweetman 2018, 17) that will benefit all genders.

### 1. Pain, Power and Pregnancy

Hardly comparable to any other phase in a human's life, pregnancy can be a time in which the boundary between self and other is blurred, which may induce feelings of vulnerability, fear and pain. Pain, for instance, is often accompanied by a literal and/or mental breaching and blurring of the borders of the body and simultaneously determines these body boundaries, as Ahmed writes: "[i]t is through sensual experiences such as pain that we come to have a sense of our skin as bodily surface [...], as something that keeps us apart from others, and as something that 'mediates' the relationship between internal or external, or inside and outside" (Ahmed 2014, 24). The skin as border between self and others can, in general, separate and connect us to the outside world, depending on how we experience the impression an outside object makes on the skin. This separation is, however, erased within pregnancy, in which the other is under the skin and at the same time impressing on the pregnant person's skin. This intrusion is strengthened by ultrasound scans, which further blur the pregnant individual's boundaries between inside and outside (see Duden 1993, 77-78; Hänsch 2012, 19-20). As a consequence of this 'inside out' sensual impression, "in pregnancy, the body's skin surface no longer straightforwardly performs the function of separating self from not-self. The skin is the site (and sight) of pregnancy" (Tyler 2001, 72). Thus, the one organ that is designed to separate inside from outside cannot function and separate body and identity from the outside world the way the subject is used to, which may lead to painful experiences.

Referring to fear as "an anticipated *pain* in the future" (Ahmed 2014, 56; emphasis mine), Ahmed links (the recognition of) pain to sensations and feelings like fear and anxiety (see 23). Especially during pregnancy, when the mixture of pleasure and pain forms a new, previously unknown experience, feelings of uncertainty and anxiety increase. This may lead to more sensitive reactions to influences from the inside and outside, which "involves the over-determination of sense perception, emotion and judgement" (25). Such emotional turmoil is further increased since the presentation of pain as a wound is often absent during pregnancy and, thus, the reason for pain becomes something abstract that eludes representation. This abstraction of the new life and reason for pain together with the back and forth between body, mind and outside world is then often connected to a heightened sense of insecurity and anxiety in a pregnant individual. As Iris Marion Young writes: "[e]specially if this is her first child she experiences the birth as a transition to a new self that she may both desire and fear. She

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the perspectives of cis-women only, which is why the term 'woman' will mostly be used in the discussion of the play.

fears the loss of identity, as though on the other side of the birth she herself became a transformed person, such that she would 'never be the same again'" (Young 2005, 55). Regarding these feelings of lost familiar identity and subjectivity that might consequently lead to vulnerability and pain, Young writes:

The pregnant subject, I suggest, is decentered, split, or doubled in several ways. She experiences her body as herself and not herself. Its inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her body boundaries shift and because her bodily self-location is focused on her trunk in addition to her head. (46)

This is akin to the ways in which pleasure and pain shape a body, where pain leads to a narrowed and pleasure to an opened body (see Leder 1990, 74). Correspondingly, Ahmed writes: "[m]y body takes a different shape as it tries to move away from the pain, even though what is being moved away from is felt within my body" (2014, 26). Within pregnancy, then, feelings of pain and fear frequently coalesce and reinforce each other.

Physical pain, as Elaine Scarry points out, is ultimately inexpressible. As pain is individual, it is a sensation that affirms one's own body boundaries and simultaneously complicates the sharing of this sensation with others: "[t]o have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*" (Scarry 1987, 13; original emphasis). What is more, pain "has no referential content" (4) and is thus objectless, which further enhances its inexpressibility. "Physical pain," for Scarry, "does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). One example of this can be found in medicine, in which the spoken expression of pain is referred to as unreliable and must be bypassed to get to the physical side of the events, a notion Scarry criticizes: "if the only external sign of the felt experience of pain [...] is the patient's verbal report [...], then to bypass the voice is to bypass the bodily events, to bypass the patient, to bypass the person in pain" (6-7). This is frequently the case with pregnant women, who are often very perceptive to changes within their body that might not be adequately measured with medical devices, as is vividly depicted in Bartlett's play.

Further, the inexpressibility of pain not just influences the experience of pain within the personal story but can also raise questions of the representation of these issues within politics: "[...] the relative ease or difficulty with which any given phenomenon can be *verbally represented* also influences the ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be *politically represented*" (Scarry 1987, 12; original emphasis). However, this inexpressibility of female pain is increasingly gaining attention not only in feminist politics but also in the few plays that have directly addressed pregnancy in the past decade or so. While historically, in theatre, pregnancy has often been used to play with concealment and "to invest the pregnant female body with predominantly male fascination and fear" (Garner 1994, 217), this is gradually changing. Drama and performance are increasingly an important platform for female sensations that are given greater attention on stage, as can be seen in the increasing, albeit still relatively low, number of new plays focussing on stories connected to pregnancy, like Duncan MacMillan's *Lungs* (2011), Zinnie Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015), Conor

McPherson's adaptation of Franz Xaver Kroetz's *The Nest* (2016), or Penelope Skinner's *The Village Bike* (2011). Their representation of negative sensations, and particularly of pain, is linked to power structures, reflecting Ahmed's observation that "[t]he differentiation between forms of pain and suffering in stories that are told, and between those that are told and those that are not, is a crucial mechanism for the distribution of power" (2014, 32).<sup>2</sup> The fact that Freya, as will be shown, does not have the opportunity to have a real conversation and to share her sorrows, fears and, in general, her story, can be seen not just as a reason for her pain and vulnerability, but also as a sign of oppressive power relations. It is this new telling of stories of pregnant women that might change public discourse on these topics, as they challenge the "taboo surrounding pregnancy" due to "the unsettling effect which pregnant embodiment has upon dominant cultural understandings of the individuated or individual self" (Tyler 2001, 73).

Beyond these overtly political concerns, pregnancy also raises questions of identity that for Julia Kristeva are linked to female gender identity: as the presence of a child inside threatens the integrity of a pregnant woman's identity, Kristeva argues, this may lead to the production of a heightened sense of femininity in pregnant women.<sup>3</sup> Kristeva claims that "[a] mother's identity is maintained only through the well-known closure of consciousness within the indolence of habit, when a woman protects herself from the borderline that severs her body and expatriates it from her child" (1997b, 323). Thus, a painless pregnancy can only exist when the woman is able to be herself and free from all expectations, a state that can be found especially within femininity itself (see Kristeva 1997a, 306). Pregnant women thus, according to Kristeva, often connect with their own mothers and find a last refuge within femininity:

The body of her mother is always the same Master-Mother of instinctual drive, a ruler over psychosis, a subject of biology, but also one toward which women aspire all the more passionately simply because it lacks a penis: that body cannot penetrate her as can a man when possessing his wife. By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself. She thus actualizes the homosexual facet of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently, more negatory of the social, symbolic bond. (1997a, 303)

Especially when pregnant and giving birth, the woman reconnects with her own mother, as a refuge and source of harmony. This becomes clear at the end of Bartlett's play, when Freya enters a (imagined) connection with her mother and child. Thus, the flight from pain and negative feelings imposed by various sources and the inexpressibility of her emotions reconnect her with her mother and her body, which is in her case accompanied by vivid hallucinations. Overall, pregnancy is then an event in which the

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2 While Ahmed is referring to racism here, I would suggest that this can also be the case for stories of other minorities or victims of oppressive structural power relations and for their experiences, including pregnancy. Thus, "stories of pain involve complex relations of power" (Ahmed 2014, 22) and must be thought of as intersectional.

3 For a critique of this reading, see Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (2008, 101-119) as well as Hänsch (2012, 22).

pregnant individual's physical and mental boundaries are often transgressed, leading to individual sensations of pain and fear, which in turn attain a political dimension: pain is unrepresentable, which has led to the marginalisation and outright neglect of the concerns of pregnant individuals and a focus on the foetus only.

## 2. "Pregnant Women are a Bit of a Pain:" Social Stigma and the Pregnant Body

*Earthquakes in London* brings together and investigates these different dimensions of the experience of pregnancy. Although many critics claim that the play's main theme is (the ignorance of) climate change reality (see Billington 2010; Brandes 2020; Gardner 2011; Jones 2017; Sierz 2010), they tend to neglect that a pregnant woman and her sorrows and needs make up "the main interconnecting storyline of the play" (Angelaki 2017, 72), which is why I would suggest that it is also about society's obliviousness of male-dominated power structures, felt especially during pregnancy. The play depicts the lives of scientist Robert and his three daughters Sarah, Jasmine and Freya, spanning the years 1968-2525. Preceding the first four acts, a prelude unveils Robert's involvement in counterfeited research on change in atmospheric conditions due to pollution in the late sixties. The first four acts of the play are then set in 2010 and involve constant shifts between the stories of Sarah, a liberal democrat politician, Jasmine, a student and activist, and Freya, a teacher who is heavily pregnant. Freya is left alone by Steve, the father of her unborn child, who secretly visits her father Robert, while her sisters are busy with their own lives. The last act partly shows Freya imagining a conversation with her mother Grace and her child Emily in the year 2525. In Freya's pregnancy, the crossing of inner- and interpersonal boundaries and the accompanying pain, as well as the impossibility of expressing this pain, are highlighted. In this way, the play comments on oppressive power relations and the necessity of supportive interpersonal relations, as Freya feels scared, isolated and neglected, while her closest contact is Peter, an intrusive teenage boy who is not able to have a meaningful conversation with her. What Bartlett's play portrays is the way Freya's pain is caused by other people imposing themselves on her private boundaries, which can be read as an allegory for the way pain and neglect are instruments to exert power over women, especially when they are pregnant.

In the play, several of Freya's private boundaries are transgressed, and Freya's individual needs and feelings are not taken seriously. In many instances she is seen in relation to the foetus, which means her individuality is lost and reduced to an involuntarily plural state where she is only thought of in relation to the foetus, for instance when Steve leaves her, ostensibly for a business trip:

**Steve** And you'll call me if anything –

**Freya** Yes, I'll call you if anything, but nothing will nothing does nothing happens you know how it is round here these days.

**Steve** I meant the baby.

**Freya** Oh right the baby, well of course / the *baby* (Bartlett 2010, 16)

Although Steve addresses Freya separately, he kisses Freya's pregnant belly instead of her lips. When Freya begs Steve not to leave her, stating "I'm a bit lost at the moment, Steve, really. Don't go," he tells her: "It's not as bad as you think. Never is" (18), leaving

her isolated and not taking her mental situation seriously. This first scene sets the mood for Freya's story and foreshadows the neglect of her emotions, thoughts and subjectivity.

Another important factor explaining Freya's fear and pain is the invasion of her private space. Such invasiveness is personified by the character of fourteen-year-old Peter. One of the first things he says when visiting his teacher Freya in her flat is: "Is that whisky? You shouldn't be drinking if you're pregnant, we saw it on a video in Biology, Mr Greg showed it us yeah and it said if you drink your baby ends up disabled or something maybe it dies in you and they have to pull it out with tweezers" (20). Peter's statement and behaviour reveal a number of social prejudices surrounding pregnancy. First, the boy talks about the future baby, not the foetus and is thus indirectly referring to the foetus as a legal person with rights and needs. Second, he visits Freya uninvited, by looking up her address on the internet (which links her home to the outside world and makes it accessible to the overall population, giving her the sense that everyone can intrude into her privacy) and violates her personal space without asking, without considering her feelings and rights as a person. He criticises the objects in her house, instantly connecting her pregnancy to alcohol (although Freya is not drinking whisky). It shows that a pregnant woman can be bullied by a teenage boy and thus her privacy counts less than the boy's need for attention, for example when Peter tells her: "You're not busy clearly, you're watching TV" (21). He keeps telling her what she cannot do, like smoking or flying – which is exactly what her partner Steve is doing at that moment – and realises that she must be lonely and that nobody visits her: "That's cos pregnant women are a bit of a pain. Sweaty and fat, stuck in the house, moaning and moaning, I don't think that miss, but most people do that's why they don't visit. But I'm here" (21-22), which strikes a nerve with Freya – her loneliness seems especially striking when compared to the idea that pregnant women are, in a sense, never alone but constantly subject to social scrutiny of their behaviour towards their own body and the foetus. What is more, third, Peter only sees Freya's husband's objects in the flat and constantly talks about them (see 25), once again giving Freya the feeling that her husband's presence is more prominent for Peter than her own, even when Steve is absent and she is actually there. The lack of punctuation in Peter's speech also mirrors its fast and intrusive nature, breaking linguistic boundaries and invading Freya's thoughts while ignoring every question she asks.

Throughout the play Freya develops the idea that there will be an earthquake in London. Despite all his shortcomings, Peter is the only one who believes Freya's theory about the earthquake, which may otherwise only take place in her body and mind and can be seen as a metaphor for her pregnancy. The word 'earthquake' itself is quite suggestive here: it is a composite of earth, a term that is often associated with fertility and Mother Earth, and quake, "to shake or tremble as a result of an external or internal impulse [...]" (OED, *s.v.* Quake). It thus suggests that Freya's fears and pain are induced externally and internally respectively by the people around her and the foetus within her and are closely related to her pregnancy and fear of becoming a mother. However, after a short passage in which he mentions the earthquake, Peter quickly returns to his own problems of isolation and "atomisation" (Bartlett 2010, 26) as he calls it, not noticing Freya's increasing inner turmoil. Therefore, when he pushes into her private

home, instead of offering Freya help, Peter requests *her* advice. When he asks: "Do you ever feel like that miss, stuck in this flat like you are, that the walls are moving and everything's becoming dangerous?" (30) Freya answers in the affirmative. At this point she has already experienced that "*the walls shake a little. She's scared*" (18; original emphasis), which seems to be the mirroring of her psychological discomfort in the physical world around her. This echoes Adrienne Rich's description of early pregnancy, in which "the stirring of the foetus felt like ghostly tremors of my own body, later like the movements of a being imprisoned in me [...]" (1976, 63). In the end, Freya feels no longer secure in her own home, in which she has the feeling that the walls come constantly closer, leading her to physically flee from her other fears and pain to London, a place she connects with the negative emotions she tries to flee from. As she admits: "I don't see anyone for days, the walls start shaking, so I think about going out but it's all shouting and dirt, so I stay in, but then... I've started singing, ever since I got back. When I sing I forget she [the foetus]'s there" (Bartlett 2010, 33). The play's eponymous earthquake is thus an expression of Freya's sensibility, an internal event triggered by outside influences at least as much as by the premonition of physical danger, and the reason for Freya's (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt at escaping her situation.

This escape must, however, fail, because, as the play progresses, Freya becomes increasingly isolated, not least due to her pregnancy. It seems as if Freya is not able to have a meaningful conversation with anyone, as if nobody really sees her as a person. When trying to reach her sisters, they both have no time for her. Later, Freya meets an older woman, but she does not engage in a real conversation with her either and only answers Freya's questions sporadically after digressing and talking about her own past. Freya's search for meaning, happiness and refuge thus stays unanswered. Subsequently, she looks for help from other mothers, who have a picnic on Parliament Hill. When she finds the picnic, the mothers with prams and sunglasses "*dance and sing, holding their wrapped up babies, showing them to each other, drinking their coffee and ignoring Freya*" (63, original emphasis). Afterwards, the mothers "*look her up and down. Smile in a fake way*" (64).<sup>4</sup> Literalising the metaphor, in the play they build a wall around Freya with their bodies and babies and tell her that her worries for the future are not important and that everything's going fine for *them*. This is the moment when the foetus is kicking Freya so violently that she clutches her belly and sinks down, encircled by the women, begging for an ambulance. "*She is scared but has nowhere to go*" (65; original emphasis), when the mothers and their babies disappear, unempathetically leaving Freya all alone on the floor.<sup>5</sup> This is not just an example of how other people encircle pregnant women like Freya with their presence and obtrude upon them, but also of how the mental image of the perfect mother and all the expectations connected with it feel like a tightening noose around Freya, which is the very opposite of a refuge for her. Thus, as Ahmed writes, "the experience of pain does not cut off the body in the present but attaches this body to the world of other bodies" (Ahmed 2014, 28) –

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4 The enthusiasm displayed by the other mothers can also be seen as a sign of what Ariane de Waal, following Lee Edelman, has criticised as "reproductive futurism" in her reading of another recent pregnancy play, Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* (de Waal 2021, 52).

5 For an analysis of the lack of empathy in Bartlett's play see Angelaki (2017, 74-76).



however painful this may be. In Freya's case, her pain connects her to other bodies and individuals, like Peter, the elder woman or the mothers, from whom she requires help but who instead further increase her pain.

### 3. "The womb getting louder and louder:" Pregnancy and the Expression of Pain

Freya's affliction continues once she enters the hospital, where she is confronted with a hierarchical (and patriarchal) power structure that does not take her own needs and sorrows seriously. In the hospital, a doctor tells Freya that her baby is healthy. However, she does not feel relieved or pleased and instantly tells her doctor that she was smoking and drinking and expects the child to be unhealthy. She asks him for an abortion, for which it is, at her stage, too late. "I thought this was civilised. I thought I had rights," she exclaims, to which her doctor replies: "We are civilised. You do have rights. But at this stage, so does your daughter. Is someone picking you up?" (Bartlett 2010, 77). Not even the doctor is taking Freya's fears and pain seriously, nor does he further inquire after Freya's desperate wish to terminate the pregnancy. The relationship between Freya and the medical staff is depicted as hierarchical, which mirrors the woman-expert relationship during pregnancy and birth, where "struggles over status and resources relegate the legitimacy of women's expertise as subordinate to that of medical professionals, through established normative and regulative practices" (Sweetman 2018, 19; see also Duden 2007, 3-4; Hänsch 2012, 18). Thus, instead of relieving Freya from her pain, the medical team that incorporates the structural oppression of pregnant individuals further adds to her distress.

The motivation for Freya seeking an abortion is at least in part the ongoing social pressure she experiences, in particular from her father. He tells her to abort the foetus, because in view of the ecological crisis the child would "regret she was ever born. Hate her mother for forcing her into a terrible world" (Bartlett 2010, 96). Thus, Freya simultaneously has to fight another source of pressure that further increases her negative feelings towards her pregnancy and that stems from the impending ecological disaster that is looming over the storyworld. As Angelaki observes, "[t]he problematic of future generations inhabiting a world in crisis is embodied in Freya's burgeoning pregnancy anxiety" (2017, 74).<sup>6</sup> Overwhelmed by an outside world that is circling in on her from several directions (family, society, ecology), she starts to focus on her own bodily

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6 Feminism and ecology are, in general, "inextricably interconnected" (Davion 1994, 11). Being subjected to similar forms of structural oppression, Kate Rigby, for instance, combines both fields under the term 'ecofeminism' by arguing that the "experiences and perspectives of women, among others who have been similarly marginalized in relation to the master model of the human, and who tend to suffer disproportionately from the results of environmental degradation, might prove particularly valuable" (2017, 60) for rethinking our relationship with nature. Freya is the only sister who is afraid of an otherwise unnoticed natural catastrophe. She proves to be particularly sensitive towards environmental catastrophes and tries to warn her family about them. While an analysis of the influence of the ecological crisis on the pregnant protagonist promises to be fruitful, the present reading primarily focuses on Freya's experiences of pain during pregnancy as a feminist topic, detached from the already widely available readings of the play as cli-fi.

experiences and needs. When the sonograph of the foetus does not calm her down and she realises that she is all alone and wants to stay in hospital, the doctor tells her that she cannot stay, once again robbing her of a refuge. Freya tries once again to tell the doctor that there is something wrong, to which he replies that this is not the case for the baby and thus having done his job he leaves the pregnant woman by herself. This is a good example of what Scarry refers to regarding the inexpressibility of pain through language, especially in medical environments and, as the play suggests, especially during pregnancy. Here Young's description of the relationship between (male) physicians and pregnant women seems to be echoed in Freya's experiences:

The control over knowledge about the pregnancy and birth process that the physician has through instruments [...] devalues the privileged relation she has to the fetus and her pregnant body. The fact that in the contemporary context the obstetrician is usually a man reduces the likelihood of bodily empathy between physician and patient. Within the context of authority and dependence that currently structures the doctor-patient relation, moreover, coupled with the use of instruments and drugs in the birthing process, the pregnant and birthing woman often lacks autonomy within these experiences. (Young 2005, 47)

This demonstrates that fields like medicine, even when referring to female topics like pregnancy, have their own, male-dominated power structures. Freya's distrust of these power structures becomes apparent when, in the next scene, she reveals that she has lip-read a conversation between her doctor and a nurse, who call her a "[m]ad bitch" and a "waste of time" (Bartlett 2010, 98).<sup>7</sup> This once again shows that the relationship between Freya and the hospital staff is dysfunctional, characterised by mutual dislike and the neglect of the pregnant woman by the doctor.

While the outside world is increasingly influencing Freya's experience of being pregnant, the unborn child simultaneously affects Freya's feelings and judgements. As she confronts her doctor with what she has overheard, her baby starts to kick hard, adding pain from the inside to the already stressful situation. Freya then turns away from the doctor to look at her child in the sonograph – the projection of which "puts the outsize visual image of the unborn child at the play's focal point" (Hudson 2012, 266) – and lip-reads her foetus saying "Mummy?" and "Help me" before she hears the sound "*of the womb getting louder and louder. Sounds like an earthquake*" (Bartlett 2010, 99; original emphasis). This shows that the foetus does play an important role in Freya's life and serves as a constant reminder, in the form of a collection of several short and painful kicks, of the growing individual inside her and its (imagined) needs and rights. Thus, the boundary between self and other, between her own thoughts and feelings and the (imposed) thoughts and feelings of the foetus are blurred, dissolving Freya's individuality and subjectivity. The earthquake in the play at this point has come to signify change, fear and pain during pregnancy, something that will shake up everything Freya thinks she knows.

Furthermore, Freya is thinking about and scared of what is happening at birth: "They say when you give birth, the pain is unbearable. That's why women forget. Your skin tears, there's blood and there's shit and you scream and it feels like you're going to die"

7 For a reading of this scene as a critique of neoliberalism, see Angelaki (2017, 75).

(114). Thus, Freya's thoughts constantly circle around fear, pain, pregnancy and neglect. Her last refuge, the hospital, which also holds the hopes of terminating the pregnancy, is gone, clearly framing the foetus's physical health as more important than Freya's mental health. She is isolated and afraid of her future and the future of her unborn child, oscillating between blaming herself and her child for the situation she is in:

I don't know why I'm here, or where I am, I don't want the baby [...]  
 [...] but I can't get rid of it, my family hate me, not a single friend has called me all week.  
 [...]  
 I'm a fuck up, a fuck up, on my own. A complete fucking MESS.  
*She looks at her belly.*  
 I don't want you! Little fucking...  
*She punches it.* (126)

Her thoughts are not just circling on topics related to the future of her child and her own involvement in her child's happiness, but read like a spiral that is going faster and faster, where her thoughts become ever more abstruse and anxious. Desperate and isolated, Freya blames the unborn child rather than the society she lives in for the unbearable burden of providing for another human being in a world of impending ecological catastrophe. Her pregnancy has turned into a source of pain and the rejection of Freya as an independent social actor.

#### 4. "I Think I Have Some Kind of Purpose:" Spiralling Thoughts

At the same time, Freya's experience of pregnancy leads her into a mental health crisis that quickly spirals out of control. During one of their encounters, Peter describes himself as a medium and asks Freya: "Who are you thinking of most? [...] Who do you think of right now?" (Bartlett 2010, 127). When the answer is Emily, Peter transforms into Freya's unborn child as a young woman. Emily, as Una Chaudhuri observes, stands for "the prophetic grandchild of a doom-mongering scientist, countering the real grandchild he advises his daughter to abort in view of the worsening world" (2015, 116) and thus highlights Freya's difficult situation. Her imagined future child is in line with the "unique temporality of process and growth in which the woman can experience herself as split between past and future" during pregnancy (Young 2005, 47). However, the time in which Freya meets and/or imagines Emily is short and every attempt to have a conversation with her unborn grown-up child fails due to Emily's passive-aggressive and disappointed language. This quite literally drives Freya to the brink: as they talk, they walk along Waterloo Bridge and Emily, echoing her grandfather's sentiments, begins to persuade Freya to kill herself so she will not be born into a world of climate disaster:

It's not too late. Just step over the barrier [...] Get used to it. Breathe. I'm sat inside you.  
 Warm and happy and I won't know anything about it. You have my entire support to  
 throw yourself off. It's better you do. I promise. (Bartlett 2010, 133)

Following this prompting of her unborn child, Freya climbs over the bridge barrier. As she is perched over the precipice, she is finally seen by her husband Steve, who is

waiting to meet her nearby. Yet as he tries to approach her, the scene reaches its surreal climax: an earthquake – it is unclear whether real or imagined by Freya – hits and Freya slips. This shows Freya's pain on several levels. First, the intrusion and ignorance of other people, like Steve or Peter, who impose expectations on her and at the same time do not take her seriously as a person and disregard her needs. Then, her own unborn child likewise obtrudes on Freya's lifestyle, by kicking or, later, (imagined) conversations that represent her needs. Finally, it is Freya's own thoughts that constantly spiral around fear, pain, the foetus and her life in general. All three influences constantly break private boundaries and dissolve Freya's individuality and personal identity, which increases her pain, fear and vulnerability. This erosion of pregnant people's subjectivity due to the crossing of boundaries within pregnancy has been described by Stanton Garner: "[b]y its very nature, pregnancy subverts the integration of bodily experience, blurring the distinction between inside and outside, myself and other, and compounding the experience of subjectivity [...]" (Garner 1994, 216).

What is more, in Bartlett's play, Freya is not able to express her pain. This echoes Ahmed's claim that "[p]ain, which is often experienced as 'already there,' is difficult to grasp and to speak about, whether in the event of talking about pain in the past or pain in the present" (Ahmed 2014, 30). Every form of refuge Freya is looking for, like other mothers, the hospital and her own mind, disappear, leaving her ever more isolated and desperate. In the end, Tyler's observation that the inexpressibility of pregnant women's pain leaves them "tongue-tied" (2000, 291) also applies to Freya. For Freya, being "tongue-tied" due to her pain and vulnerability ultimately leads to a private catastrophe, in which she falls from Waterloo-Bridge, which leaves her unconscious and hospitalised.

In the last act, after falling from the bridge, Freya finds herself in the future of the year "2525, or possibly at a hospital" (Bartlett 2010, 139; original emphasis). As the scene unfolds, the setting oscillates between these two possibilities. As with her earlier experience of the earthquake and shaking walls, it remains open whether this is a hallucination as the result of a psychotic episode, a near-death experience, or whether she has been somehow magically transported into a future in which "[w]e don't have diseases or pain, we don't have suffering or death, we have only peace. Peace and life" (140).<sup>8</sup> Here, while being unconscious, she imagines she meets her mother Grace. The

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8 The aesthetic uncertainty about what is supposed to be 'real' raises questions about the play's genre: the double perspective presented in the last act (and throughout the play, as far as Freya's experience of fear and pain is concerned) departs from a strictly realist framework and is reminiscent of the way in which magical realism exploits the doubling of magic and realism in order to defer normative judgment – in this particular case, a judgment of the pregnant protagonist by the societal norms that marginalise the concerns of pregnant individuals – during the reception process (see Bowers 2004, 3-4). In this context, it is noteworthy that the name of Bartlett's pregnant protagonist is that of the Old Norse goddess Freyja, who is not only associated with fertility and beauty, but also with magic (see Simek 2006, 112-114), including the magic of seeing the future. Her name thus reflects her position in the play as pregnant protagonist and herald of an anticipated future, but also of events that seem to 'magically' depart from everyday experience.

peace and life described in this last act were unthinkable in Freya's earlier present, which she remembers thus: "I was so scared! I didn't... I didn't know what to do" (140). Grace then tells her she is safe. Thus, while fleeing from the pain and suffering surrounding her, Freya finds protection in the arms of an imagined mother figure, a hallucinated feminine safe harbour. "Those afflicted or affected by psychosis," as Kristeva writes, "have put up in its place the image of the Mother: for women, a paradise lost but seemingly close at hand [...]" (1997a, 304). However, this scene does not last very long and in the next scene Freya is unconscious again, on a ventilator, back in 2010. Steve talks to her former doctor and reproaches him for neglecting Freya's mental health, to which the doctor answers: "She was worried about the baby but we tried to put her mind at rest, we let her stay in overnight, and then in the morning she checked herself out. We had no reason to think she would ... well" (Bartlett 2010, 141). In light of her earlier interactions with the doctor, whom she repeatedly told she was not feeling well (see 77), this shows how Freya's worries and fears have been ignored and the focus of the medical treatment has always been on the foetus. At the end of the play it is clear then that pregnancy is the source of several border crossings concerning the pregnant body and social status as well as the erosion of her subjectivity and, as a result, affects her mental well-being.

This crossing of boundaries also becomes clear on the formal level, which provides a "beguiling mix of social comedy, political discussion, family drama, sci-fi fantasy and energetic entertainment" (Sierz 2010). Therefore, similar to Freya's story, in which she meets various people and at the same time does not feel she belongs to any of them, *Earthquakes in London* plays with shifting boundaries and cannot be allocated to one genre. Additionally, everything on stage is set up to blur and break boundaries. While the set is overflowing with props, colours, lights and the disproportionately large number of 36 characters, making attention for and identification with any character difficult, the "*scenes crash into each other impolitely. They overflow, overlap. The production should always seem at risk of descending into chaos but never actually do so*" (Bartlett 2010, 5; original emphasis). This crammed and chaotic stage mirrors Freya's confused and frightened state and also mirrors the breaking of her personal (mental and physical) boundaries and everything that influences her. The crossing of these borders also becomes especially clear at the end of the last act, in which Grace tells her daughter Freya:

When you fell in the river, Freya, you hit your head. You did some damage. And sometimes, when that happens people become unable to see a distinction between their own particles and those around them. They can't see the edges of their body anymore – where they stop and the world begins. They can instead understand instinctively that we are all just different recycled pieces of a larger, older creature. We are simple earthquakes ourselves, wonderful irregularities in an evolving system. We die and the earth uses us for something new. [...] Your brain is doing what it always does. Making sense of what it receives. Combining, imagination, memory, information. (Bartlett 2010, 153-154)

It is Freya's quest to find happiness and pleasure that keeps her searching, even when unconscious, in the depths of her mind. As Kristeva writes, the close maternal relationship between mother and child during pregnancy and birth "is a whirl of words, a complete absence of meaning and seeing; it is feeling, displacement, rhythm, sound,

flashes, and fantasied clinging to the maternal body as a screen against the plunge" (1997a, 303). In the play, this is conveyed by the metaphor of the earthquake, the walls that come closer in Freya's flat, the mothers and children rhythmically coming closer to Freya's pregnant belly, the language that is slipping from her fingers and vanishes and subsequently by the hallucination and connection to her own mother.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, then, *Earthquakes in London* illustrates how, within Western cultures, pregnancy is still influenced by patriarchal systems and thus mirrors how pregnancy is "defined by a biomedical framework that produces a normative femininity of fearfulness and dependence, and subverts the identification and expression of female strength and empowerment" (Sweetman 2018, 28). In the play, Freya has to deal with negative feelings and pain on three levels: the first level is the outside world, in which other people (fathers, friends, strangers) project their emotions on the pregnant woman, the second level is the foetus, which, once again, projects its (imagined) emotions on the pregnant individual and the third level are the pregnant protagonist's own thoughts and emotions during pregnancy, leading to a mixed-up experience of fear, insecurity and pain during pregnancy. However, pregnancy is just the beginning of these negative feelings and sensations, as Kristeva writes: "One does not give birth in pain, one gives birth to pain [...] a mother is always branded by pain [...]" (1997b, 313). It is thus not enough to read Bartlett's play as an eco-drama. It should also be read as a play that reveals oppressive power structures, originating in society and operating on pregnant individuals. Viewed like this, *Earthquakes in London* suggests that pregnancy needs to be reappropriated by the individuals who are pregnant (Hänsch 2012, 20).

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