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Shui-yin Sharon Yam

To cite this article: Shui-yin Sharon Yam (2019): Birth Images on Instagram: The Disruptive Visuality of Birthing Bodies, *Women's Studies in Communication*, DOI: [10.1080/07491409.2018.1561564](https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2018.1561564)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2018.1561564>



Published online: 13 May 2019.



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ARTICLE



Birth Images on Instagram: The Disruptive Visuality of Birthing Bodies

Shui-yin Sharon Yam

Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA

ABSTRACT

This article examines Katie Vigos's petition and Instagram account @empoweredbirthproject that protests the social media platform's censorship against images of physiologic births. In analyzing specific images, captions, and responses from the audience, I argue that Vigos's project functions as an alternative form of birth educational material that retrains the audience's gaze and feelings toward birth and the laboring body. I demonstrate that @empoweredbirthproject actively disrupts the dominant articulation of childbirth as pathological and the laboring body as abject by prompting audience members to consider the ideological underpinnings behind their emotional reactions toward images of physiologic births.

KEYWORDS

Abject; birth; body; feminism; health; social media; visual rhetoric

In December 2017, Katie Vigos, a registered nurse and doula, started a Change.org campaign petitioning for Instagram to revise its censorship policy on images and videos of physiologic birth—births defined by the American College of Nurse-Midwives as “powered by the innate human capacity of the woman and fetus ... [without] unnecessary intervention that disrupts normal physiologic processes” (529). Many of these censored images involve full-frontal nudity of the birthing person, and close-ups of vulvas, breasts, and bodily fluids at the moment when the baby crowns and exits the vaginal canal. While Instagram claims that the platform censors these images because they violate its community guidelines against nudity (Jones), Vigos argues in the petition that this censorship policy demonstrates that the platform assigns a negative value judgment on physiologic birth by classifying these images as obscene, pornographic, and “too offensive for the public eye” (Vigos para. 2). For Vigos, birth is a part of everyone's life whether one has given birth or not; thus images of physiologic birth ought to be categorized as educational materials instead of pornography (Vigos).

Vigos's campaign received overwhelming support and coverage from mainstream media outlets, such as *BuzzFeed*, *Huffington Post*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. Her petition was also widely supported by members of the birth community on Instagram, who engaged regularly with her account @empoweredbirthproject. The account circulates images and information of interest to pregnant people and birth workers, ranging from images of different kinds of birth to data about racial disparities in maternal health outcomes and

CONTACT Shui-yin Sharon Yam  s.yam@uky.edu  Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies, University of Kentucky, 1333 Patterson Office Tower, Lexington, KY 40506, USA.

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breastfeeding rates. Seven months after Vigos submitted her petition containing more than 20,000 signatures to Instagram's director of public policy, she was notified that Instagram and its parent company, Facebook, had lifted their censorship against birth images. As of October 2018, @empoweredbirthproject has garnered more than 382,000 followers, making it one of the most prominent and influential Instagram accounts on pregnancy and birth (Jones).

In this article, I analyze Vigos's arguments against Instagram's censorship and three specific images on @empoweredbirthproject; I also examine the responses the account has generated from its followers. I argue that the circulation of uncensored birth images serves two rhetorical functions. First, the circulation of these images invites users to critically evaluate the use of birthing technologies. I build on Marika Seigel's argument that pregnant people ought to be granted critical access to the medical-technological system of prenatal care and birth to "understand the benefits and problems of these of technologies well enough to be able to critique them when necessary and use them when necessary ... to not use them when necessary" (Banks, qtd. in Seigel 3).¹ By allowing Instagrammers who are not medical professionals to witness the birthing body in action, @empoweredbirthproject rejects the epistemic and visual monopoly that medical institutions have over birth and invites the audience to collectively learn from the photographed subjects. The promulgation of birth images on social media illustrates how critical access to birthing technologies can be facilitated through visual representations of the messy, unruly, and abject birthing body that affectively propels the audience to question dominant ideological assumptions and practices.

Second, I posit that by circulating Instagram posts that normalize different forms of birth, @empoweredbirthproject educates its users to adopt an alternative gaze when they encounter the abject corporeality of birthing bodies. Rather than subscribing to the dominant mode of representation that classifies birthing bodies as disgusting and grotesque, and that they must be cast out of public sight, Vigos's account represents the abjection of birthing bodies as a subversive counterdiscourse against the pathologization of birth and the monopolization of knowledge by medical institutions. The dissociation of negative emotional and affective responses from the abjection of birth is politically significant because pregnant and birthing people cannot be effective critics and advocates for themselves if they dare not recognize and gaze at the unruly corporeality of birth. The retraining of the audience's gaze paves the path toward helping viewers achieve critical access to birthing technologies, which have historically been made inaccessible to those who lack the cultural capital to navigate dominant medical institutions.

Dominant articulations of birthing technologies and bodies

The pregnant and birthing body is constructed by dominant public discourse and treated by the technomedical system as a faulty machine that must be monitored by medical experts to fulfill its function of delivering a healthy and normal baby (Seigel). Under this medical model of birth, births are pathologized as a high-stakes event that are inherently risky and dangerous; the construction of births as inherently risky and dangerous justifies the constant monitoring of the pregnant body by physicians

(Seigel; Young). This has particularly troubling implications for nonnormative and marginalized birthing people who do not adhere to the ideal of married, White, heterosexual, middle-class mothers because they are even less likely to obtain critical access to birthing technologies and institutions (Roberts; Oparah and Bonaparte).

Scholars in motherhood studies and the rhetoric of health have written extensively about the increased medicalization of birth (Dickinson et al.; Lay; Malacrida and Boulton; Seigel; Owens). Tracing the shift from the midwifery approach to the current more dominant obstetrics medical model, these scholars argue that the pregnant and birthing body has become increasingly pathologized and monopolized by bureaucratic medical institutions (Dubriwny and Ramadurai; Lay). Kim Hensley Owens notes that dominant discourses of childbirth in the United States are saturated with what she calls the “medical progress narrative” that associates the midwifery approach to childbirth with “ignorance, filth, and death” and bolsters the lifesaving power of sterility and biomedical technologies in birth practices (19). This progress narrative portrays biomedical technologies and medical institutions as superior to and more trustworthy than the embodied and experiential knowledge of birth held by midwives and the pregnant women themselves; it also turns birth into a “technomedical event” in which physician monitoring and regulations are deemed necessary to ensure a safe birth (Davis-Floyd 84). As public health and midwifery researchers observe, popular media depictions of birth in TV shows and films perpetuate this medicalization and pathologization “by portraying birth as risky, glorifying obstetric technology, and trivialising adverse effects of obstetrical interventions” (Stoll et al. 224). As a result, women who learn about birth from mainstream media tend to fear birth more and are more likely to prefer having a cesarean section despite its longer recovery time (Stoll et al. 224). In short, the pathologization of birth by medical institutions works in tandem with popular consumerist cultural materials.

In addition to having a direct impact on women’s perceptions of birth and the decisions they make about it, increased medicalization also normalizes certain ideologies about pregnancies, fetal rights, and what counts as expertise in the birthing context. Mainstream public discourse championed by the obstetrics community frequently prioritizes the role and knowledge of medical professionals over the interests and desires of pregnant people, reinforcing the ideology that “the pregnant body is a site through which social, political, and environment threats can be managed” (Seigel 26). The medical model of birth functions as the hegemonic practice and discourse that undermines the birthing person’s autonomy to make personal, informed decisions (Lay; Dubriwny and Ramadurai).

Because the fetus stands in for the future of the nation-state, fetal rights are prioritized by the state (Berlant; Seigel). As a result, any failure or unwillingness to comply with medical advice is seen as posing unnecessary risks to the future of one’s citizenry. Justified by the medical progress narrative and the ideology that fetal rights trump the birthing and pregnant person’s rights to bodily autonomy, current sociopolitical and medical discourse shifts authority and agency away from those pregnant and birthing into the hands of medical institutions. Consequently, women subjected to dominant practices of obstetrical medicine could feel alienated from their own experience (Young).

To more radically address the structural power imbalance between pregnant people and medical professionals, Seigel argues that education materials must be available to grant “critical access” to the medical-technological system of childbirth; namely, pregnant people should receive the opportunity to learn “how to question the experts, how and when to disengage from the system,” and how to refuse and demand different procedures during the birthing process (3). Seigel advocates for system-disrupting education materials that enable audiences to challenge and manipulate existing practices and ideologies. By prompting pregnant people to reconceptualize their identities and their relationship with the dominant medical institutions and technologies of birth, system-disrupting educational materials could help them become more agentic before and during childbirth. As Seigel notes, these materials ought to render pregnant bodies more visible and validate pregnant people’s own embodied and experiential knowledge of their bodies and births.

Vigos’s @empoweredbirthproject account and her petition against Instagram’s censorship policies suggest that the images and videos of physiologic childbirths are system-disrupting materials with the potential of providing the audience critical access to the dominant institution and technologies of birth. While @empoweredbirthproject does not explicitly promote what many consider natural birth (nonmedicated, minimal-intervention home birth), the rhetorical purpose and effect of @empoweredbirthproject echoes the alternative childbirth movement that began in the 1970s to counter the hegemony of mainstream medical institutions over the practice and ideologies of pregnancy and birth (Gaskin; Kitzinger; Owens; Rich; Schuster; Seigel). In the following sections, I first discuss the rhetorical context of Vigos’s Change.org petition. I then analyze popular Instagram posts from @empoweredbirthproject that circulated after Vigos’s successful campaign against the platform’s censorship policy. By studying these posts and the comments they generated among the audience, I demonstrate how these images function simultaneously as effective system-simulating and system-disrupting materials that harness the audience’s uneasy fascination toward representations of the abject birthing body as a way to promote more politically productive emotional responses toward birth.

Abjection and containment

Instagram’s censorship of images of physiologic birth coheres with the dominant articulation of the birthing body as obscene, abject, and thus in need of containment. The abject represents the primal, unacknowledged substance we most dread because it threatens to “disturb identity, system, [and] order” by challenging the boundaries that demarcate the inside from the outside and the subject from the object (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 4). The pregnant and birthing body in particular “represents feminine excess at its most extreme, the boundless, bulging body standing as the epitome of unruly fecundity, fears of abjection reinforced by the act of birth, where amniotic fluid, blood and the afterbirth issue forth uncontained” (Ussher 161).

The abject birthing body is often represented as grotesque horror because it disrupts the illusion that we might always maintain a solid boundary between the animal and the human as a rational and controlled subject (Foster; Ussher). To maintain the

illusion of a coherent and stable subjectivity, the dominant society tends to “repress, control, exclude, and ritualize” the abject (Rogers 226). However, as Elizabeth Grosz reminds us, feminine corporeality is not inherently horrifying but acquires its connotation as disgusting from dominant social orders that are threatened by its potential to transgress. In their respective examinations of abjection, Grosz and Claire Sisco King argue that even the revered male masculine body carries traces of the abject. Yet masculine corporeality is often not considered disruptive to the existing patriarchal social order and is not punished and marginalized in the way that feminine corporeality is.

Because the abject is always constitutive of the subject and “even the most privileged subject positions bear traces of the abject” (King 372), it can never be completely cast out. As Kristeva argues, the abject is “that ‘improper’ facet of our impossible ‘own and proper,’” thus making all of us “foreigners” to ourselves (*Strangers to Ourselves* 191). As a result of the abject’s “overproximity” with the subject (Foster 114), the subject reacts to representations of the abject with simultaneous panic and fascination (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*). Evoking such contradictory affective responses in the audience through representations of the abject is subversive because it challenges audiences to acknowledge the abject in all cultural formations and recognize that their disgust toward feminine, maternal corporeality is socially conditioned by a patriarchal system. Kristeva suggests that to disrupt the existing social order “the task of the artist is no longer to sublimate the abject, to elevate it, but to plumb the abject” (qtd. in Foster 115). In other words, rather than attempting to disarticulate the birthing body from abjection, the rhetor can more provocatively challenge the dominant patriarchal social order by confronting viewers with uncleansed representations of birthing bodies, calling out the moral codes that abject and alienate birthing bodies and people.

By circulating birth images without any attempts to elevate them beyond the unruly bodies and messy physiological events they portray, @empoweredbirthproject challenges established representational practices containing the abject birthing body. While Vigos explains that the primary goal of @empoweredbirthproject is to empower pregnant people, she also intends to make a political statement with her campaign by challenging dominant articulations of birthing people’s corporeality with the obscene (Jones). According to Instagram’s initial response, these images were banned from the platform because they violated its zero-tolerance policy against “sexual intercourse, genitals, and close-ups of fully-nude buttocks” (“Community Guidelines” para. 5). As Vigos writes in her Change.org petition, Instagram’s policies classify childbirth “with pornography, graphic violence, profanity, and other subject matter it deems too offensive for the public eye” (para. 2). Vigos argues that this censorship policy not only perpetuates an oppressive standard for feminine beauty in which the vagina is acceptable only when it is “clean, tight, and hairless” but also sends “a message to women that your power to give birth is offensive and obscene, and should be hidden” (qtd. in Jones). By advocating for Instagram to change its policy on birth images, Vigos challenges existing ideologies and representational practices that regulate birthing bodies as if they are contaminants that must either be cast out or purified. Instead, Vigos posits that the abjection of birthing bodies should be seen and recognized as such.

By classifying the images of physiologic birth as obscene and preventing them from circulating on the platform, Instagram engaged in the containment of what Ussher calls

“fecund corporeality,” so platform users would not experience the horror of seeing bodily signifiers of abjection in the form of a seeping, leaking, and bleeding birthing body (81). In her petition, Vigos demonstrates that she is aware of both the intention and effect of Instagram’s containment strategy. She writes:

This pervasive attitude toward birth is counterproductive to our mission of normalizing birth and releasing it from shame, stigma, and social taboo. The only way we can begin to change the way society views and appreciates birth, is to stop categorizing it as offensive material and start allowing our community the freedom to share uncensored images and information. (para. 3)

As a social media platform that generates income through the traffic brought on by images of aspirational beauty, Instagram’s ethos and business interests are seemingly at odds with Vigos’s campaign because images of abjection could turn the users’ gaze, thus directing traffic and profit away from the platform. Digital media researchers Katrin Tiidenberg and Nancy Baym observe that an overwhelming majority of users who perform pregnancy on Instagram post images and captions that reproduce dominant norms that morally regulate pregnant people. Vigos’s @empoweredbirthproject challenges not only Instagram’s censorship policy but also normative representational practices of pregnancy and birth on the platform.

Despite the challenges Vigos’s petition poses to the platform’s policies, Vigos’s and Instagram’s interests align exactly at the direction of the users’ gaze; like Instagram, Vigos seeks to cultivate more user engagement with her account on childbirth because enhancing public visibility of the birthing body and birth as a physiological event is crucial to disrupting dominant, pathologizing representations of birth. In her statement, Vigos deftly points out that there is a large and growing birth community on Instagram that has been “contribut[ing] to the power and popularity of Instagram’s platform” by sharing information about birth and connecting with one another and with birth professionals who are active on Instagram (para. 1). Her statement suggests that by removing its censorship policy, Instagram can support the #IGuncensoredbirth movement as well as continue to profit from the traffic that the birth community brings to the platform.

Vigos’s argument makes clear that the circulation of birth images on Instagram cannot be divorced from the business interests and brand image of the social media company. Social media platforms like Instagram often turn the digital production of mothers’ personal narratives and experiences into commodities that help the platforms generate more profits through traffic and advertisement (Van Cleaf; Wilson and Yochim). Ashley Mack has demonstrated how social media engagements could foreclose the opportunity for radical feminist critique by subsuming motherhood and birth into the neoliberal individualist and consumerist framework. Alternatively, Vigos’s @empoweredbirthproject suggests that, by strategically aligning with the interests of Instagram, feminist advocates can produce and circulate system-disrupting materials that prompt the audience to consider the ideological underpinning of dominant birth discourse and practice, and thus gain critical access to birthing technologies.

Visuality of birthing bodies as empowerment and disruption

In this section, I examine three posts on @empoweredbirthproject, each of which garnered about 20,000 likes on Instagram after the social media company lifted its

ensorship policy. By analyzing the rhetorical effects of these posts through users' comments, I illustrate how the circulation of physiologic birth images disrupts patriarchal medical discourse on birth and conditions the ways audiences respond emotionally to the sight of birthing bodies. Like most content on @empoweredbirthproject, different users produced and first posted these images on Instagram. Instagram removed many photos, but some users reposted those images using Vigos's hashtag #IGallowuncensoredbirth. Vigos shares some of these images on @empoweredbirthproject with her own captions that explain the significance of each to the campaign. I studied these images after they were reposted by Vigos because they garnered the most attention after they appeared on @empoweredbirthproject. I approach these reposted images as rhetorical productions that invite the audience to adopt a particular gaze and orientation toward childbirth and the birthing body that recognizes the abject as constitutive of the birthing body, and as such, it should not be cast out from public sight or be approached with shame. Such recognition, in turn, helps birthing people secure critical access to birthing technologies, freeing them from the dominant expectation to cast out an unruly yet integral part of their bodies.

Visuality as feminist knowledge production and empowerment

In an interview explaining her campaign, Vigos emphasizes the importance of physiologic birth images in helping women gain critical access to the technologies and events of childbirth:

So many women have commented that they had no idea what vaginal birth actually looks like, that these types of photos inspired and informed them in their preparations for birth, and so forth... . Photos of physiological birth show women in an ultimate moment of power and surrender. A large baby exiting a vagina may seem impossible at first. And then it happens, the baby comes out, and new life is born. And if women trust and believe they can do that, then they can trust and believe that anything and everything is possible. (qtd. in Warren para. 12)

Vigos suggests that by seeing the embodied process of physiologic birth, women become better educated about possible scenarios and are more equipped to make decisions about their own circumstances surrounding childbirth. Rather than reinforcing the dominant medical articulation of the pregnant body as risky, necessitating monitoring by experts and an approach with vigilance and anxiety, Vigos's posts on physiologic births depict the birthing process as messy and affecting yet nonpathological and normal.

In my survey of the comments posted, many vocally support Vigos's campaign. A few others, however, remark in the comments that they find images containing blood horrifying, particularly when they show up in their feeds unexpectedly. Vigos addresses this issue by marking certain posts as containing "sensitive content." Images that are categorized as such remain blurred until users actively click on them. Vigos argues in her petition that this allows those who are actively seeking these educational materials access, while preventing the images from triggering others. Vigos's concession suggests that despite her conviction behind promulgating birth images more freely, she understands that some will continue to find such depictions traumatizing.



Figure 1. Lauren Archer's father, Brian Archer, took this series of photographs during the birth of her child, Silas.

When Vigos first began her campaign against Instagram's censorship policy (@empowered birth project, "Please sign my petition"), she shared postpartum doula Lauren Archer's series of birth photos (Figure 1), and that post remains the most highly engaged post on Vigos's Instagram account (Jones). This series of images was repeatedly removed from the platform when Archer posted it on her own account. When Vigos reposted Archer's photos on @empoweredbirthproject in December 2017, the post was liked 30,000 times, with 3,000 comments that were overwhelmingly supportive (Yarrow). This series of images was subsequently circulated by mainstream news media in support of Vigos's petition, making them the de facto symbol of the movement.

This series of images disrupts the medicalization and pathologization of birth by showing a home birth in a room that is clean, well lit, and without any bulky medical equipment. At the same time, the stethoscope used by the midwife to examine the newborn illustrates that a home physiologic birth can still make effective and unobtrusive use of medical technologies. While Archer has also shared birth pictures with her face clearly in frame, her face is absent from this particular series of images. Audiences could therefore easily imagine themselves as the person giving birth who is featured in these pictures.

The coproduction of bodily knowledge between the audience and Archer is key here to the disruption of the patriarchal and pathologizing gaze of the obstetrics-gynecology community. In her caption for Archer's birth images, Vigos reiterates the main argument in her petition that all birth-related content on Instagram ought to be classified as educational materials. In an interview with *Elephant Journal*, Archer notes that being able to share these intimate images to a wide, public audience is important because of their potential to empower birthing people:

The amount of women commenting that they have never seen what a vaginal birth looks like was astounding but the amount that saw that picture and it made them feel empowered is exactly why I was so happy to allow Katie and now you, to show those photos. (qtd. in Warren)

Archer's remark harkens back to the 1970s tradition of feminist public health advocacy through visual rhetoric. In fact, the images shared on @empoweredbirthproject echo the visual rhetorical tradition deployed by second-wave feminist health advocates of the 1970s. As Kristan Poirot points out, to counter gynecology's patriarchal pathologization of female genitalia, the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers (FFWHC) encouraged women to conduct self-examinations of their genitals; the FFWHC also widely circulated images of sexed-female anatomy to amplify women as "active subjects of desire and participants in their own and others' health care" (77). By championing women's embodied experiences as the most empowered form of knowledge and by advocating for women to visually examine their bodies together as a way of knowledge production, these feminist health advocates challenged the epistemological monopoly gynecologists had over the female body (Kline). Indeed, @empoweredbirthproject espouses similar ideologies and makes use of images of physiologic birth to help its audiences feel more empowered and informed about their birth. As Poirot observes, the act of *looking with* the photographed subject liberates the viewers "from passive acceptance of a male-dominated view and firmly implicated as interlocutors in a visual interaction" (84). Archer, by inviting the viewers to learn from images of her own birthing body, positions herself and the viewers both as active participants in the knowledge-making process, enabling audiences who lack critical access to birthing technologies to gain embodied insights.

The comments viewers left on this post are overwhelmingly positive. Many of them are from Instagrammers who are pregnant or have already given birth. Numerous viewers remark that while they have given birth to their children vaginally, they have never seen the birthing process. As one Instagram user states, "Omg this is the first time I've actually seen the head of the baby coming out. After having 2 girls of my own. Its [*sic*] amazing what the woman's body can do!" Another writes, "I had a vaginal birth with my 16 month old daughter but I have never seen one myself until I saw these captivating photos (before they were taken down)." ²

For these commenters, Archer's physiologic birth images not only serve an educational purpose by allowing for more transparency about the birthing process but are also affectively moving because they reflect what the viewers' bodies are capable of during birth. As Iris Marion Young points out, contrary to the dominant assumption that pregnant women experience their heavy bodies as an obstruction and alienation to their subjectivity, women do in fact become aware of their pregnant bodies in an "aesthetic

mode,” “experiencing them as a fullness rather than as a lack” (51). Young further argues that “in the experience of the pregnant woman, this weight and materiality often produce a sense of power, solidity, and validity” (53). Against the assumptions perpetuated by dominant discourse, pregnant persons can, in fact, attune to the corporeality of their bodies with interest, wonder, and even pleasure. Archer’s images afford individuals who have not been able to witness their own birthing body the opportunity to visualize the corporeality of the process. Eschewing from providing any explicit instructions, this post and many others like it on @empoweredbirthproject does not didactically and discursively educate the audience the way conventional pregnancy and birthing manuals do; instead, it teaches the audience alternative ways to see and feel their pregnant and birthing bodies to become more agentic and empowered when they make health and medical decisions.

In addition to promulgating the collective “feminist self-help” ideology that feminist health advocates subscribed to in the 1970s, @empoweredbirthproject engages in similar visual rhetorical strategies common among second-wave activists (Murphy 2). Specifically, the account deploys proliferation and diversification to disrupt the dominant optics on birthing bodies (Poirot 77–79). As Poirot argues, by showing the audiences ample images (proliferation) of female-sexed anatomy that demonstrate visible differences across the woman’s life stage and across different bodies (diversification), feminist activists in the 1970s countered the patriarchal orientation of gynecology that pathologizes female-sexed genitalia and monopolizes the standard by which a body is judged “heathy” and “normal.”

By proliferating images of many different births on a variety of different bodies on Instagram, Vigos prompts her audience to reconsider the validity of applying one standard of measure on every birthing person. Her goal is to counter the pathologizing portrayal and discourse of childbirth by presenting birth as a normal physiological process that, while never risk free, is not frightening or violent (Jones). Vigos argues that without seeing many different birthing bodies in action, pregnant people cannot make fully informed decisions about their birth because they cannot “conceptualize a vagina opening for a baby to pass through” (qtd. in Jones). The lack of visual knowledge on the birthing process promotes fear among birthing people and encourages compliance with the instructions given by medical professionals, even when those instructions and protocol do not cohere with the birthing person’s desires and bodily experiences. For Vigos, the ability to circulate videos and images of physiologic birth as educational materials is key for pregnant people to obtain critical access to birthing technologies.

Diversification and critical access

Diversification is also central to help audiences gain critical access to birthing technologies as it allows them to witness how births that go against the established obstetrical standards of normalcy can still be successful and nonpathological. In one of her posts, Vigos shares an image taken by a photographer in Brazil of a vaginal breech-birth delivery with no outside intervention (Figure 2).

In mainstream obstetrics science, a breech presentation is considered riskier than the normative presentation in which the baby’s head is positioned closer to the birth canal;



Figure 2. Cecilia. Photo taken by Lela Beltrao.

breech births are also connected to an elevated chance of delivering a baby with birth defects (American Pregnancy Association). To help mitigate potential risk, most clinicians are trained only to recommend and provide a cesarean delivery for women whose fetuses are in a breech position (Cunningham et al.; Grens).

The image Vigos shares directly challenges the existing medical protocol and dominant belief about what is commonly considered to be an abnormal birth. In her caption, Vigos describes how she personally felt more secure about her own birthing process after recalling the physiologic images she had seen. Vigos thus believes that the affective and visceral power of images may help reassure birthing people when they feel overwhelmed. Vigos further notes in her caption:

Sometimes, when it comes to birth, seeing is believing... . I'm passionate about sharing #uncensoredbirth photos for many reasons, one of them being how helpful and important it is for birthing people to see that it is possible. And in this case, this incredible hands-off breech birth. Breech Birth is an endangered practice, with fewer and fewer practitioners being trained in attending and assisting this variation of normal. Behold—see it. Believe it!

As Celeste Condit points out in her analysis of fetal images in the abortion debate, images function effectively as persuasive materials by either replacing the discursive argument or by summarizing it through visual means. Images are powerful persuasive tools because “they help ‘envision’ the material impacts of abstract policy commitments” (Condit 81). The visuality of what was previously abstract gives images particular potency; although audiences tend to be wary of textual arguments, Condit opines, “we humans tend to trust our own senses, we take what we *see* to be true” (81). By circulating a close-up image of a hands-free vaginal breech birth and urging her audience to see and believe in the possibility of it, Vigos persuades her audiences to reexamine the dominant pathologization of childbirth, particularly when the fetus is not in a normative position.³

This image functions in two different ways. For audiences who are already persuaded that a vaginal delivery is possible and desired for a breech birth, this picture can deepen their belief both about the method of delivery and about the plausibility of others

agreeing with them. However, for those who are skeptical of birth discourse and practices that contradict routine medical protocol, this image (coupled with Vigos's caption) provides grounds for them to question the absoluteness of dominant medical instructions, which are often phrased as commands that leave pregnant and birthing people with little leeway for alternatives. For individuals who choose not to comply with what the obstetrics community considers to be routine procedures, they face public pressure that requires them to shoulder the responsibility for potentially delivering an "abnormal" child (Dubriwny and Ramadurai; Seigel).

Vigos's call for the audiences to "Behold—see it. Believe it!" rearticulates what constitutes expert knowledge in childbirth. By juxtaposing dominant obstetrics instructions on routine cesarean for breech birth with an image of a woman doing otherwise, Vigos redefines the experiential knowledge produced by the birthing woman as an alternative form of expert knowledge. The image represents actual bodily experiences that counter mainstream medical advice. By allowing the audience to see this image of unassisted breech birth and many other physiologic images that were previously censored, Vigos visually and ideologically demystifies childbirth and the birthing body. As Vigos's post posits, the obstetrics community does not have a monopoly over expertise and knowledge in childbirth. The rearticulation of expert knowledge helps establish Vigos's post as system-disrupting material that invites active questioning and critiques of dominant practices. Although Vigos works as a critical care nurse, a midwife assistant, and a doula, she does not use her medical knowledge to provide a didactic commentary in her caption. Instead, she informs audiences that few medical professionals are currently trained to help women deliver a breech birth vaginally with minimal intervention, and she prompts them to question the underlying reasons behind the obstetrics community's insistence on cesarean deliveries. In other words, Vigos's post highlights what is possible without providing any mandates. By inviting her audiences to engage in their own process of critique and negotiation of the dominant technological system of childbirth, Vigos's post helps them achieve critical access.

In addition, the post dispels negative emotional connotations attached to the birthing process and in turn prompts audiences to explore birthing technologies and options that they otherwise might have eschewed out of fear. The image of the hands-free breech birth evidences the birthing person's capability to deliver a nonnormatively positioned baby without relying on medical intervention. While dominant discourse constructs birth as fearsome, technological, clinical, and alienating, and the birthing body as risky and always on the brink of malfunction (Seigel), Vigos's caption and image depict birthing bodies as capable. By discussing her experience of evoking the image of other birthing women to dispel her own fear and anxiety, Vigos indicates that seeing and believing the capability of the birthing body helps counter the feeling of helplessness and alienation prevalent among pregnant people in the dominant technological system of childbirth, thus empowering them to seek critical access to birthing technologies (see Rich; Seigel; Young).

Obtaining critical access is particularly important for nonnormative birthing people because the medical monopoly and pathologization of birth are inextricably connected to the policing of sexuality, body size, and race. Black birthing people and fat birthing people, for instance, are often considered high risk by obstetricians and thus are more

likely to undergo cesarean births (Oparah and Bonaparte; Vireday). Queer people and nonnormative families, on the other hand, are frequently silenced by the deeply gendered, heteronormative discourse and practice of birth (Hoffkling et al.). If birth is pathologized, then the birthing bodies of nonnormative individuals are doubly so. For example, as Megan Elizabeth Morrissey and Karen Y. Kimball observe, Black women are visible in the public sphere mainly only as hypersexualized, incompetent mothers or as slaves; rarely are they represented and seen as subjects of knowledge and capable parents.

For @empoweredbirthproject to challenge the status quo in birth practices so that all birthing people are respected and equipped to make informed decisions for themselves, it must share images not only of diverse birthing methods but also of different agentic, nonpathological birthing bodies. Although Vigos does not adopt an intersectional framework in her Change.org statement to discuss the value of @empoweredbirthproject, the account features many birth images of Black and queer birthing people and families. In her captions on those posts, Vigos often highlights the joy of the photographed subjects and portrays them as parents who deserve proper public recognition.

While @empoweredbirthproject engages in the diversification of birthing bodies to disrupt the standardization of birth and the patriarchal disciplining of nonnormative birthing subjects, its efficacy on that front remains unclear. As Erin Rand notes, the effect of representing the physical bodies of vulnerable subjects in public discourse is highly unpredictable because these subjects likely are “already hyperembodied and visible” in ways that perpetuate their marginalization (123). Indeed, while almost all of the posts that feature nonnormative birthing people are well liked (with Instagrammers posting positive and validating comments about the photographed subjects), two posts that feature a pregnant trans man to promote trans inclusivity in birth received no comments at all (“Equally a family”; “What I have been told”). In other words, the visibility of queer birthing bodies on @empoweredbirthproject does not do enough to prompt critical discussions on how dominant birth practices and expectations marginalize queer people in different ways.

Representations of abject as disruption

Despite this limitation, @empoweredbirthproject has garnered enough public attention to generate sustained critiques of existing birth practices and discourse on and off Instagram. By producing a large following on Instagram through the circulation of birth images, @empoweredbirthproject successfully engages in what Seigel calls “system-simulating documentation” in which the “primary purpose is to keep the users engaged” without necessarily perpetuating the dominant system of practice and articulation (131). Because the artifact does not uphold the hegemonic system, by sustaining the audience’s attention long enough system-simulating documentations could help facilitate critical access (Seigel). Although the grotesque often elicits disgust and unease among audiences, its transgressive and indeterminate nature attracts their gaze and sustains their engagement with the artifact (Goulding et al.; Journey). Thus, by attracting the audience’s gaze through representations most consider grotesque, @empoweredbirthproject

prompts viewers to critically reexamine their emotional responses to the abjection of birthing bodies.

Although the grotesque that is associated with the feminine abject commonly elicits a strong, visceral urge from the audience to cast out the offensive artifact, it can also be mobilized to disrupt dominant notions of normalcy and beauty (Edwards and Graulund; Harpham). As Kenneth Burke notes, the grotesque is constituted by the unexpected juxtaposition of incongruent elements based on existing cultural norms. For instance, most find uncensored physiologic birth images grotesque because these images juxtapose the supposed purity of a newborn baby with the abjection of viscous bodily fluids and the vagina. As Anna Journey argues, because the grotesque is constituted by the dissolution of boundaries and is by nature constantly in flux and ambivalent, it can be deployed by rhetors “to infringe, or go beyond, the bounds of aesthetic, ethical, or established forms of behavior” (15). Framed this way, engagement with representations of the grotesque constitutes an affective process that propels the audience to move across thresholds and be affected by other bodies in ways that could reconfigure existing articulations and relationships (Chaput; Massumi). Scholars such as Brian Massumi and Lawrence Grossberg connect affect to visceral, embodied intensity that cannot be contained or harnessed by the dominant discursive and ideological regime. As Brian Ott argues, affects “function as the first step towards an evolving attitude” (50). In the case of birth images, the visceral discomfort and unease that stems from seeing the grotesque birthing body could productively propel viewers into adopting a different frame of looking and feeling about birthing bodies and their abjection.

The delinking of disgust from physiologic birth images is important to disrupt the dominant social order that marginalizes the birthing body and renders it abject. Because disgust is visceral and does not call for any critical or logical explanation, it can easily be mobilized to justify the exclusion and alienation of the Other (Nussbaum). Therefore, to challenge dominant practices that marginalize and silence birthing bodies, Vigos must retrain the audiences’ gaze so that they experience more politically productive emotions when confronted with representations of the abject birthing body. By sustaining viewers’ attention and prompting them to question their immediate affective responses to physiologic birth images, Vigos retrains the gaze and orientation of her audiences to engage in a form of “embodied witnessing” that unyokes the feelings of disgust and shame from the visuality of birth (Cram 423). As E. Dianne Cram points out, “[W]itnessing manages the contingent intersections of visuality and emotionality” in ways that “condition how one emotionally responds to a cultural exigency evoked by an image” (417). While the birth images on @empoweredbirthproject are mediated on a digital platform, viewers nevertheless engage in a form of witnessing that generates a bodily impression, propelling them to feel differently about birth and representations of the birthing body.

In one of her posts, Vigos shares the image of a rare *en caul* birth, in which the newborn is still encased within the amniotic sac as crowning begins (Figure 3). This image depicts the birthing woman’s contorted face, her bloated stomach lined with purple stretch marks, and the amniotic sac emerging from her vagina, confronting viewers with the excess of fecund corporeality and the grotesqueness of the abject (Nash; Ussher). Images like this portray the “extreme suspension of the bodily distinction



Figure 3. Photo taken by Sarah Widnyana.

between inner and outer” that occurs during the birthing process (Young 50). The image of the en caul birth visually captures the exact moment of liminality and border crossing as the fetus becomes a human, and the woman ceases to contain the fetus and the amniotic sac.

The visual representation of grotesque corporeal liminality may move and unsettle audiences in ways that prompt them to reexamine the ideological assumptions that undergird their visceral reactions toward the picture. Unaccustomed to seeing the abjection of birthing bodies, particularly on a social media platform suffused with images of conventional, aspirational beauty, most Instagrammers likely react with disgust and horror when they encounter this image of en caul birth. Rather than directly acknowledging the audiences’ immediate affective responses, Vigos’s caption nonchalantly states, “Just an everyday reminder you are more powerful than you can possibly imagine” (@empowered birth project, “Just an everyday reminder”). Vigos invites the audience to look at the image not as a shocking specimen unfit for the public eye but as a normal event that demonstrates the capability of the birthing person. Since many followers of @empoweredbirthproject are pregnant women, Vigos’s caption can be interpreted as a message directed to women who experience anxiety and fear due to the pathologization of birth and the shame that cloaks any representations of abject birthing bodies. If the audiences feel uneasy or are disgusted by the image, Vigos’s caption prompts them to examine their reactions and judgments by providing an alternative interpretation, one that counters the socialized feeling of disgust and fear.

By normalizing the body of the birthing woman and the en caul birth captured in the photograph, Vigos’s post urges the audience to reconsider the established emotional templates to which they subscribe. While the birthing body remains abject because of the ambiguity and liminality inherent in childbirth, Vigos’s caption encourages audiences to approach the ambiguity with wonder. Referencing Luce Irigaray, philosopher Shannon Sullivan defines *wonder* as “a kind of surprise felt in the face of the strange that lets its difference be without trying to assimilate it into something known, same, and familiar” (39). Because wonder exists prior to judgment, it is free from the constraints of established hierarchies and ideologies (La Caze). By urging audiences to witness the capability

of the birthing person's body, Vigos is encouraging them to replace disgust with a sense of wonder toward the possibilities that occur during childbirth.

Retraining affective responses

The user engagement that these posts have generated on Instagram suggests that Vigos's @empoweredbirthproject has been successful in generating sustained attention and discussion about the visuality of physiologic births and the dominant emotional templates surrounding such images. Each of the three posts analyzed in this article has generated about 20,000 "Likes" and close to 1,000 comments. While Instagram users who have already given birth state that they find it empowering to witness the embodied process of physiologic birth—some for the first time—pregnant people preparing for their first birth often comment that these posts prompt them to critically reflect on the birthing technologies and dominant discourse to which they are exposed. One Instagram user comments:

As a pregnant mama this blog has helped me to so much to erase the fear of childbirth and to have a realistic idea of what it will be like. It is not fair that the only approved images of newborns and birth are staged, unrealistic photos of older babies and idyllic moms. Why cover the beautiful truth of labor?

Another user reflects on her initial aversion to these images:

It's amazing because I am doing a homebirth soon and at first averted my eyes when I seen the original photos. why?! And then I made myself LOOK and I almost started weeping because not only did those photos actually make me less scared they also made me feel empowered, it defitnely [sic] does not look as "scary" or "as bad" as my brain imagined it to look like. I can do that! This is what's missing for women, informed photos and decisions about the birth of their dreams! It's not scary, it's magical!

Both users remark on the common association between birth and fear that stems from a lack of nonpathologizing and nonromanticized representations of birth in mainstream media (Bessett and Murawsky). These users suggest that by retraining the audiences' gaze toward depictions of physiologic birth, the images on @empoweredbirthproject prompt them to critique how their immediate visceral reactions are socially conditioned by the patriarchal tendency to silence and cast out the feminine Other.

The effects of the medicalization of birth and the pathologization of the birthing body are apparent in the second comment as the user questions her own immediate affective reactions in response to [Figure 1](#). In particular, she wonders why, despite the fact that she is opting to have a similar experience as Archer, her knee-jerk reaction toward the images was to look away instead of gaze at the pictures and engage with them as educational materials. When she does look—as she puts in all capital letters—she is affectively moved to feel differently about her pregnant body and the impending birthing process; rather than fearing the difficulties, risks, and grotesque corporeality of birth, this commenter implies that she now anticipates the birthing process with wonder.

As this comment suggests, Archer's photos replace the image of a "scary" and perhaps even gory childbirth commonly depicted by mainstream media (Sakala). Mack points out that much social media content associated with the alternative birth movement also depicts childbirth as excruciatingly painful. While mainstream media uses pain to deter women from practicing nonmedicated births, these alternative media valorize pain and posit that a

woman can achieve self-empowerment and transformation only if she has resiliently endured the painful experience. Despite the differences between their undergirding values, both sets of media prompt audiences to associate the birthing process with immense suffering. Alternatively, the images on @empoweredbirthproject highlight the corporeality of birthing in ways that do not sentimentalize or valorize the birthing person's pain. These images give the audience a third option to visualize what childbirth could be like.

Though the second comment references images that highlight the goriness of birth, the first one points to a different genre of images commonly found in consumer culture: a calm, clean, and often clothed mother who adores her equally clean baby. While the images on @empoweredbirthproject depict bodily fluids, vaginas, and bloated feminine bodies that are commonly associated with the grotesque, these two viewers—together with many other commenters—describe them as “beautiful,” “magical,” and emotionally powerful because these photographs alleviate their fear of childbirth. By describing these images as awe-inspiring instead of disgusting, these users participate in the rearticulation of birth and the birthing body. The visuality of abject birthing bodies, in other words, works hand in hand with discursive articulations to reinvent public reactions towards the sight of physiologic births.

The celebration of the maternal subject's embodied knowledge and supposedly innate capability, however, could easily be translated into a neoliberal, individualist “self-made” narrative that forecloses room to critique the structural causes of power imbalances and health disparities in maternal health. As Mack points out, home-birth advocates on YouTube frequently evoke the capability of the birthing woman to argue that for women to have an empowering birth experience, they ought to cultivate the self-sufficiency required to have unassisted home births; this narrative, Mack argues, perpetuates a naturalist discourse of motherhood and prevents audiences from engaging in more radical ideological and structural critiques of the dominant technocratic medical model of birth. While @empoweredbirthproject and its followers do often deploy naturalist discourse birth, it is mobilized to remind the viewers that abject birthing bodies are not something that can or should be contained and cast out. If the birthing process is always going bear traces of the abject, Vigos's project posits, then perhaps it is more productive for the viewers to interrogate the operation of abjection and their conditioned emotional reactions.

Contrary to unassisted home-birth videos, @empoweredbirthproject does not posit that birthing people can be empowered only if they exercise their “‘innate’ ability to function autonomously in the birthing process” (Mack 54). Among the physiologic birth images I have surveyed on @empoweredbirthproject, almost all of them depict birthing persons supported by their partner and/or other members of their birth team, which sometimes includes medical professionals. In addition, while most of these images feature home births, many are taken in a hospital setting. Vigos notes in one of her comments to a follower's question about unassisted births that she “strive[s] to celebrate all birth ... and encourage people to make informed decisions.” She adds that she “know[s] all too well” that unassisted births or home births are “not for everyone” after having had an emergency cesarean section herself. Although the focus of #uncensored-birth has been on physiologic births, Vigos validates other forms of birth and advocates for her audiences to gain critical access of different birthing technologies to make their own informed decisions without any shame or guilt.

Conclusion

Vigos's petition and Instagram account highlight how the birthing process and body are simultaneously stigmatized, sexualized, and pathologized by dominant patriarchal discourse and ideologies. By encouraging audiences to interact with birth images with a sense of critical wonder and curiosity instead of disgust and fear, @empoweredbirthproject prioritizes birthing people's embodied experiences as a form of knowledge and invites viewers to collectively learn through the visibility of physiologic birth in spite of its abjection. The audiences' enthusiastic engagement with Vigos's posts demonstrates the need for a more diverse range of educational materials for pregnant people that allow them to witness a wide range of births on different bodies and in different environments instead of merely informing them of routine medical procedures and birthing technologies.

The success of @empoweredbirthproject in challenging dominant representations and discussions of birth illustrates the need for rhetorical scholars and advocates to pay closer attention to the way abject visibility functions as a mode of disruption. By bringing to the foreground sights of uncleaned abjection, images could affectively propel viewers to consider the sociopolitical conditions, particularly the medicalization of birth, that punish gendered bodies by rendering them abject. When pregnant and birthing bodies are constructed as pathological and potentially destructive to the future of citizenry (the fetus), medical institutions and the state can more easily exercise biopolitical control. This phenomenon is particularly dangerous to subjects who are marginalized not only by their pregnancy but also by their sexuality, gender identification, race, and class.

This case study demonstrates that the visibility of abject bodies, particularly when they are circulated on mainstream media platforms, could poignantly disrupt the existing hierarchy by demanding that users revise their ideological assumptions undergirding their aesthetic and value. While Vigos's campaign and account began by focusing on birthing women and primarily heteronormative families, the rhetorical effects of @empoweredbirthproject illustrate the potential for visibility to disrupt not only dominant perceptions of birth but also the way birth intersects with race, disability, gender, and sexuality. In fact, there are increasing numbers of Instagram accounts run by trans birth activists and reproductive justice advocates of color that feature images of nonnormative, often multiply marginalized birthing and pregnant people the way they would like to be seen.⁴ By circulating on mainstream social media bodily images that are largely considered obscene, grotesque, and pathological, these subjects engage in a visual form of resistance to assert their right to be recognized and seen on their own terms.

Notes

1. I use gender-neutral language to discuss birth and pregnancy unless the authors and sources I engage with identify as or refer specifically to women.
2. While the user comments I analyze here are all public, I am aware that individuals' expectations of online privacy can be ambiguous and fluid. I have chosen not to include any of these users' handles.
3. Vigos and her account followers use the terms "hands-free birth," "free birth," and "unassisted birth" interchangeably.
4. Some examples include @biffandi, @momsincolor, and @indigemama.

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