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HOPE DEFERRED: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON REPRODUCTIVE LOSS (INFERTILITY, MISCARRIAGE, STILLBIRTH)*

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It had been raining all morning and the earth gave way softly as Wendy and I dug into it with spoons from her kitchen. We were quite a sight—two women, huddled under a black umbrella in the corner of a yard, digging … and crying. Wendy had been bleeding for three days and she looked ghostly; she had just miscarried an eight-week pregnancy (her fourth) and was grieving not only this present pain but her dimming hope of ever having children. She had collected in her grandmother's handkerchief a few small remnants of her loss—a combination of bloody tissue and dashed dreams. We placed these in the earth and tried to think of something profound to say, but words wouldn't come. Having spent years together in a women's group at our local church, we were accustomed to praying to God in the feminine. But today, lifting up prayers to "Mother God" seemed a cruel joke, and we felt bereft as we struggled to find other theological images that might hold us in this moment. We were and continue to be strong advocates for "women's right to choose", and so praying for "a lost life" also struck us as wrong; and yet as feminists, we desperately wanted images that might bind us with our sisters in this time of loss and grief. But nothing came. Caught in a rift, our words fell unspoken into the grave we had carved out of the dirt, and I remember how very alone we felt.

We were far less alone than we imagined, however. According to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, 6.1 million Americans presently

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experience infertility (which represents ten percent of the childbearing population). Additionally, twenty-five percent of women of childbearing age will experience a miscarriage (not including abortion), and one in eighty pregnancies will end in a stillbirth. As these statistics suggest, the experience of Wendy is shared by many in our society. It is endemic and widespread. And yet it remains a topic that North American public discourse continues to address only in cold clinical terms, if at all.

This is particularly true in two communities of discourse that cross the lives of Wendy and myself—the feminist community and the mainline Protestant church—two places where one might expect there to be powerful resources for reflecting on the character of such loss in the lives of women (and men). The absence of such reflections in these places is, therefore, especially striking. In this essay, I address this particular silence by bringing the experience of reproductive loss into conversation with two fields of thought in which I work: feminist theory and systematic theology.[1] My hope is that by bringing the insights of these discourses to bear on this experience, we might begin to better understand not only why such painful silences surround reproductive loss but what resources are available to help us think about this issue, both as individuals who suffer this loss and as a broader church that seeks to understand it.

How might feminist theory and theology help? That morning in the rain, Wendy and I did not first and foremost yearn for a conceptual argument about such things as Divine providence or feminist notions of freedom (although each topic, in our later reflections, became enormously important). What we yearned for was more basic. We wanted images, a drama, a story, a vivid language that could draw together our strange experience in the rain and the faith and feminism which have so profoundly formed us. What we sought, I believe, was the barest outlines of a feminist theological aesthetic.[2] We needed a form or a genre of knowing that, crossing the multiple borders of our complex lives, could give meaningful shape to this particular event. As women of faith, we understood our lives as unfolding in the presence of divine grace; but caught in the force of this event, we were hard pressed to "see" how reproductive loss found its place in this unfolding. As such, we sought an image that might allow us to "see" this vividly; a compact visual, drama that we could imagistically inhabit as we asked: What does Wendy's body look like in the space of this unfolding grace? How might she imagine the future here? And who is the God who holds her body and her hope in the folds of this grace?

In the pages ahead, I will take the reader on a rather circuitous journey as I attempt to answer these questions and offer a rough outline of such an aesthetic. In the first part, I outline difficulties in defining "reproductive loss"; in the second part, I lay out the principal features of the experience of such loss as they have been narrated to me by women who have gone through it. In the third part, I describe "four tales of the self" frequently used

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by feminist theorists, and I explain why each dramatically fails to include the reality of reproductive loss. In the final section, I turn to the world of systematic theological reflection and begin to mine its resources for challenging this failure. Traveling along this route, you will no doubt note that my interest in this topic moves beyond purely pastoral concerns. Reproductive loss raises enormously important philosophical questions about the nature of the self, and it does so in a manner that allows feminist political theory and systematic theology to push against one another in interesting ways. Because my own work as a theologian stands in the space of that pushing, I have found this topic to be a productive site for serious reflection on matters of crucial import to both sides.

I. Defining "Reproductive Loss"

As with any exercise in theory or theology, one's first task is to define the topic upon which one is reflecting, to circumscribe its boundaries. With the subject of "reproductive loss", I have found that this task is more difficult than it might first appear.

In the grief literature on reproductive loss, the three topics usually treated are infertility, stillbirth, and miscarriage.[3] In clinical terms, infertility describes a biological condition in which conception cannot take place (although it is often expanded to include biological conditions in which a fertilized egg cannot be sustained *in utero* for any number of reasons, including genetic ones); a miscarriage (often referred to as spontaneous abortion) is the loss of a pregnancy after conception but before twenty-four weeks; stillbirth is the loss of a pregnancy any time from twenty-four weeks to term in which the fetus dies *in utero* or immediately following delivery (in many such cases, the fetus must be "delivered" either by Cesarean or vaginal birth, and hence the term "still*birth*").

While these definitions provide helpful biological descriptions of the three topics I treat here, they do not address what I consider to be the most important dimension of the experiences for my purposes: the subjective experience of the women for whom these biological events become the occasion of grief. More specifically, I am interested in looking at the experience of women who desire to have biological children, who are biologically unable to do so, and who experience this bodily inability as failure, a desire thwarted, a loss of a potential child they hoped for and expected. In other words, I am focusing principally on women who: 1) want to have biological children and try to do so; 2) are physically unable to; and 3) feel this inability to be a profound loss. According to the grief literature, the mourning that ensues when these features are present—as in the case of the three forms of loss I mention above—is distinct.

Describing the focus of my reflections in this manner makes it clear that I am concerned here primarily with this experience as it affects women and,

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hence, not men. This selective focus is not meant to imply, however, that men do not grieve such loss; many do, and they often grieve in ways quite similar to women.[4] There are, however, differences in men's and women's embodied relation to this kind of loss and hence differences in their texture of grief; my selective focus on women allows me to highlight those features of their grief particular to their embodied reality. My description also makes it clear that because I am interested in women who try to but cannot biologically reproduce, I am not going to deal with reproductive loss associated with abortion. While it is clear that many women go through a period of grief after an abortion, their grief does not usually include mourning the failure of their body to either conceive or carry a pregnancy (although it does often include a profound sense of being betrayed by one's body).[5] It is also the case that some women who choose to terminate pregnancy do not think of it as a loss, and in such cases, the event does not necessarily occasion grief.[6]

Having said this about the experiences I am not including, I must also add that those experiences my definition does include are more complex than one might first think. Their complexity appears on several levels. First, wading into the murky waters of "subjective experience" is an exercise in ambiguity. I have said that I look at women who "want" to have biological children, yet what it means to "want" something is quite complex.[7] Anyone who has realistically contemplated the prospect of having a child knows the reality of competing and often conflicting desires about its possibility: one can both want and not want children simultaneously. Not surprisingly, women who experience infertility, stillbirth, and miscarriage often feel similarly conflicted about the loss. Further, I am looking at women who experience in their grief the death of a hope, the thwarting of an expectation. But like desires, human hopes are always multiple, conflicted, and persistently indeterminate. Our motivating expectations and hopes are not always as clear to us as we would like them to be. At times, we are not even aware of their presence, even in cases where they quite dramatically shape the character of our daily living. This is particularly true with respect to hoping for the birth of a biological child.

Related to this, it is important to note that the experience of grief associated with infertility, stillbirth, and miscarriage never occurs in a vacuum. It is always socially mediated. It is a grief, which like all griefs, is shaped by its cultural context; and this cultural shaping occurs at many levels.[8] For example, recent feminist work on the topic of motherhood helps us appreciate the degree to which women's sense of failure around not being able to bear children is related to powerful cultural assumptions about the value of motherhood.[9] To grow up a "woman" in this culture is to grow up formed by a thickly gendered identity script wherein one's body is assessed in terms of its treasured capacity to give life and thereby to make one "a mother". To be a full woman is thus to bear children and then to lovingly

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raise them. Admittedly, this script takes different forms (often theological ones) depending on one's social location, and it thus affects persons' self-understanding in different ways and to varying degrees. But even in the context of these differences, the force of this construction is strong, its pull virtually inescapable. Because of the advances of feminism, many women now have social permission to resist this pull; but even in such cases, its power remains, if only at the level of unconscious expectations which are, of course, continually reinforced by dominant social and theological images of women as mothers.

Tied to this is the fact that the women whose experience I am exploring live in a culture that measures a person's value according to what they "produce" or "make", be it through the labor of body or of mind. Formed in an economic system that thrives on a rhetoric of "efficient production", our culture identifies persons according to what they do—what commodity they produce, be it a theological education, a car, or a web homepage. Related to this is the view that as agents who creatively make things, persons are capable of and responsible for making the terms of their future (an understanding of persons which has deep theological roots).[10] Persons have thus come to expect that they should achieve the particular future of their desiring, albeit one imagined within limits (but limits which do not usually include the reality of reproductive loss). In such a culture, to experience one's body as "unproductive" is consequently to experience the body as a social failure and to view the hopes that were tied to this body as a failure as well.

I lift up these two constructions—motherhood and production—because they frequently emerge in women's description of their experience of reproductive grief. However, there are numerous other constructions that craft women's hopes and body images and hence the contours of their experiences of grief in these situations. For example, feminist theorists have done extensive work in recent years uncovering the often racist features of these two reproductive myths: they expose the many ways in which our cultural valorizes Euro-American motherhood while demonizing the mothering bodies of African-American women and Latinas.[11] Similar dynamics follow the lines of class and ethnicity as well, showing ever more clearly that political stakes transverse our images of maternity and nurturing womanhood.

There are also other factors which effect this experience of grief. The advent of new reproductive technologies has dramatically raised women's expectations for successful pregnancies and deliveries.[12] Home pregnancy tests now make it possible to name a "pregnancy" within days of conception, hence increasing women's actual experiences of reproductive loss—moving it far ahead of the culturally sanctioned "quickening" which marked the beginning of pregnancy until only recently. Further, the age of women having their "first pregnancy" has also risen in recent years thus increasing

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instances of infertility and miscarriage. Feminists working on environmental issues have also made us aware of the threat that pollution brings to women's fertility.

I offer this list of social and cultural factors that play into women's experience of reproductive loss because I believe understanding them helps women (and men) better respond to the complexities of this experience. By naming these factors, however, I have complicated the task of this project. I have strong theological and feminist reasons for questioning many of the scripts that mediate, for women, the experience of reproductive loss—particularly those social myths that lead women to feel that if they cannot produce children, they are not only failed women but failed persons. In light of the harm caused by such views of women, it is crucially important that work like mine not exacerbate their power by unquestioningly accepting them, and I try not do that here. I also believe we need to have a much more politicized understanding of how reproductive technologies are used and how we respond to the racial and environmental dimensions of infertility.[13] As such, I do not want to bury these issues in my more subjectively focus analysis of the experience. This is difficult to do, however, because this project tries to honor women's stories of loss, no matter how uncritical, irrational or "unfeminist" they may sound. This involves listening in a manner that resists the urge to simply reduce the experience of grief to an account of its social construction. Granted, nothing escapes the force of social construction, but alas, this insight need not end or even exhaustively determine the terms of our conversations about such things as reproductive loss. Indeed, to treat such loss and its complex dimensions as if they are simply harmful social products is to do violence to their integrity.

II. A Tale of the Grieving Self

Having made these general comments about reproductive loss, let me now move to the heart of my project to explore what I believe to be central features of this grief.[14] Because I am interested in eventually exploring what this grief looks like within the drama of faith, what I offer in this section is itself a kind of drama—a drama of reproductive loss. It is an "inside look" at four images of self that haunt women who struggle with this kind of event.

As Wendy and I dug into the dirt in her yard that morning, Wendy felt for the first time in several days that she was doing something she had control over. She felt like an agent whose intentional actions—even the simple action of turning over mud—were controlled and had measurable consequences. This momentary feeling of control and agency stood in stark contrast to the radical loss of agency she experienced in the midst of her miscarriage. As she told it, "A woman like myself is accustomed to viewing my body and my creative powers as something I control. My body, myself. I grew up believing that I could choose the conditions of my sexuality and

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my reproductivity. I thought I had a so-called choice. And yet now, I find myself walking around my kitchen bleeding away a life that I quite intentionally chose to make … and I am completely powerless to save it. I am completely helpless in the face of whatever it is nature appears to be doing here. I cannot stop the blood, Serene. It keeps pouring out of me and then washing away, lost. I cannot stanch its flow; it seeps out through the pores of my will which so ardently fights to stop it. I cannot change these things, even though I desire to do so more than anything else I have ever desired."

Wendy also explained that stealthily wrapped around this sense of lost agency was its counterpart: a sense of enormous guilt and responsibility for this miscarriage she couldn't stop from happening. I hear this often when women speak of their grief. Like Wendy, they tell me, again and again, that their first thought when learning of their loss is that somehow it is their fault. "What did I do to make this happen?" they ask. "Was it that cigarette I smoked last Saturday? The glass of wine I had three weeks ago? Did I not take the right vitamins?" Or even more painfully, "Have I done something to deserve this? Is God punishing me? Is this fate's revenge for sins I have committed in the past? Is it because of the abortion I had ten years ago? Is it the drugs I used as a youth? Is it the mixed feelings I had about the pregnancy in the first place?" Although most women are able to recognize the often irrational quality of their assumed guilt (as well as the level of responsibility they might rightly assume), this doesn't lessen the insidious force of these feelings. This is only exacerbated by a growing medical rhetoric that holds women singularly responsible for the success or failure of their pregnancies. In such a context, their sense of culpability usually grows as they try to figure out what happened medically and, quite often, their past begins to look like one long tale of bad decisions and lost chances.[15]

Tied up with this first feature of reproductive grief—the paradoxical intertwining of lost agency and guilt—is a second feature that marks one's sense of self: the enormous sense of a future lost, a hope forever deferred. Regardless of how one medically views the status of tissue produced by the pregnancy, the woman who wants a pregnancy is going to imagine the potential life that is at stake in every attempt at pregnancy. Further, she does not imagine it as just any life; she views it as a particular life, the life of her potential child. She immediately envisions it as a person with a smile like her father's, or thick, black hair like her sister's. She also begins to measure her own future in terms of this imagined child's development. She imagines where he, her son, will sleep or what she, her daughter, will wear. She envisions him at school or her learning to drive. She conjures up the many possible tones of his voice or the shape of her feet, at birth and then at fifty. The woman's body begins to anticipate holding the child; she can smell her daughter's birthday cake; she can hear her son singing in his high school years. Her whole being, it seems, stretches itself into this child's future, and

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this future becomes the space of her own becoming. In the words of Paul Tillich, "All time is expectation." For her, this could not be more true, for she is quite literally expecting this child. And then, her hope dies.

When a desired pregnancy fails—whether it be through a stillbirth or a failed in vitro fertilization—the woman experiences this known and yet unknown child not just as "failing" but as "dying". And with it dies a passionately imagined future, a future that is both the child's and the woman's. She thus grieves not only an immediate loss, but the loss of an entire lifetime, a lifetime lived vividly in the drama of her hoping. In many cases, this works a peculiar and painful twist on a woman's relation to time itself. As the future she imagines collapses, so too collapses her capacity to envision the future with any sense of expectancy. In this sense, the death of expectation harshly reconfigures her understanding of time. Women have told me that along with their inability to make a child comes a sense of their inability to make a future. When this happens, time stretches before them as a story of parching barrenness or violent bloodiness; in either case, it no longer stretches before them as a book that they are invited to write. As Wendy described it, she spent days, perhaps even months—she couldn't measure it—wandering in a strange land where time held no promise. Out of kilter, disoriented, bleeding, her body could not anticipate with joy even the next second of its existence, to say nothing of the years of future existence she had previously celebrated. Because the child that dies exists so completely in the space of hope and imagination, its death produces in the self its negative mirror image: the death of hope and of the capacity to relate to time as the space of expectancy, a welcoming space into which the self is invited to walk.[16]

This undoing of time finds its spatial counterpart in a woman's experience of the loss of bodily integrity. I call this third feature "the rupturing of self". It describes the confusion about self that occurs when one experiences the radical dissolution of the bodily borders that, in ordinary time, give the self a sense of internal coherence. By "borders", I refer to those morphological lines that mark the difference between the outside and the inside of self. In the throes of reproductive loss, women often describe a feeling of not knowing where they physically end and where the outside world begins. This is because their insides are quite literally falling out. A woman may also find that with the loss of borders comes a loss of one's ability to contain, both physically and psychically; her womb will not hold the child because, she feels, it has lost the ability to keep inside what belongs inside and to keep out what shouldn't be in. So, too, she becomes, at a cognitive and emotional level, more broadly confused about who she is. She cannot even contain herself. Wendy described this well. She told me how she felt fragmented, dispersed, like she was leaking into the world. For the woman who is miscarrying or having a stillbirth, this fragmentation means leaving pieces of herself and another in rags, in toilets, in medical waste cans; she tries to

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hold this all together but can't. For the woman who suffers infertility, this loss of bodily integrity is often the result of the constant invasion of her body by medical technologies that promise to extend her reproductive powers. She becomes confused about where she ends and it begins. It becomes her, and vice versa. This dissolution also happens to her each time she sees the unwanted blood of her cycle, a blood whose cramping flow once again announces the advent of a dying, not a living.

This sense of not being able to contain, of being fragmented and rupturing, is heightened even further as she begins to experience the fourth and perhaps most wrenching dimension of her grief: her body becomes to her "the space of death". As several women have described it to me: "My womb is a death bed, my body a grave." There is no other experience, in the mix of our many human griefs, that comes close to mirroring this. She carries death within her body … but she does not die. Death becomes her. It fills her, a final death, and yet she lives to remember not a death diverted but a death accomplished and completed in her loins. The experience of stillbirth shows this most vividly. She holds in her womb the dead, imagined person whose future she has conjured. What does it mean to know one's self as a walking site of death itself? To have death quite literally inside you? It is hard to imagine the contours of this self—the self who is meant to produce, be creative, give life, and make a future, but who rather holds the stench of decay in the depths of her being—and she lives to tell of it. It is at this point in the experience of reproductive loss that women describe losing the capacity to speak. Instead, they wail or sit in aphasiac silence. I believe this is partially because in Western culture, we have no images for the self who carries death within her. And because of this, we greet the woman who knows such loss with silence.

If she is lucky, her imagination stops here, with death inside her. For many women, however, this imagery runs more deeply and cuts more harshly as she begins to see herself not only as a grave where death is held, but also as the active agent of that dying. As Wendy described her grief that morning, she told me she felt as if she had killed the life within her, that her body had attacked and destroyed it. She asked me, then, what it meant that her body, her womb, had *killed* the tissue and hopes we were burying. Had her body murdered? Why had her body rejected and killed the "other" whose life she so passionately desired to nurture? While she knew she was speaking to me in metaphors—she knew she had not intentionally destroyed life—this image of killer had a profound grip upon her. Why had she destroyed the other who lived inside her? she asked. And why was she left alive to experience its dying? For a woman who has been raised to value maternal care, the ethical force of this experience of "killing the other" is devastating. Can one envision a more powerfully anti-maternal image? Not only does she not give life as a mother should, her body takes life away. Here, our most treasured conceptions of selfhood crack open and fall apart, unable to bear

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the weight of this brutal possibility. And again, those who suffer it are left without consoling images.

What I offer here is a series of four very difficult images that I believe capture something of the crisis this experience produces in the women who go through it. At many different levels, these images of reproductive grief run counter to our dominant conceptions of what persons are and do. In doing so, these images form an aesthetic logic of selfhood that runs counter to our culture's more familiar logics of selfhood. Instead of experiencing herself as an agent, the woman grieving reproductive loss knows herself as powerless to stop it and yet guilty for her perceived failure. As her hope dies, she also becomes a self without a future. She is a self whose borders are as fluid as the blood she cannot stanch, a self undone. And in the space of this undoing, she is the anti-maternal self who doesn't give life; she takes it away. She is the space of total and finalized death, perhaps even an imagined killer. And in the most uncanny twist of all, she is the one who lives through this all; she carries death and yet lives. When these four dimensions of her loss are woven into a single picture of grief, we find a portrait of suffering that is painfully unique in its form. As such, it is a suffering that calls out to feminists and theologians: Can your visions of the self hold me? Can your theory bear my weight? To this call, let us now turn.

III. Three Feminist Tales of the Self

Can feminist theory bear the weight of this experience and the portrait of selfhood it gives us? One would like to think that, yes, it could. But that morning in the rain, Wendy and I felt otherwise. We simply couldn't find a feminist language to hold it. What I want to suggest here is that part of the reason we failed to do so is that feminist theories of the self are, for the most part, predicated upon scripts of personhood that not only don't include the possibility of reproductive loss; they run counter to it.[17] To illustrate this, let us look briefly at the three central "tales of the self" that feminists have used to theorize women's experience in general and reproduction in particular: the tale of the self as "agent" as "maternal ground", and as "discursive site".

Consider the first account of the self: the self as agent. It is one that North American public discourse rehearses frequently. It undergirds the principal legal arguments given by liberal feminists for reproductive freedom as well as a myriad of other political issues related to women's emancipation.[18] In this story, woman is figured principally as a self who, following the logic of classical social contract theory, is endowed with an indissoluble right to self-determination. Central to the enactment of this freedom is her natural ownership of her body. She is a "choosing agent" who possesses a "productive body". She is the self who is always in the process of becoming her own "self-creation" as she makes the world she desires for herself.

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While feminist theorists have strong grounds for critiquing this model of the self, even the harshest feminist critics of this model are reluctant to sacrifice agency and self-determination in their bid to dismantle the false foundations of liberalism. I share this reluctance but remain troubled by the forms of self this construction excludes. When a morphology of reproductive loss is taken as the context for conceptualizing selfhood, the language of choice falls apart because the self is figured as having thwarted agency—thwarted capacity for self-creation. While the self may still possess its body, the body refuses to yield what the self desires. Nowhere is this tension between the liberal agentic self and the self of reproductive loss more obvious than in contrasting accounts of abortion and miscarriage. In the first case, feminist theory narrates a scenario in which a woman's right to self-determination significantly guides the process of moral reflection; in the second, the same biological event demands an acknowledgment of the profound limits of that self-determining power. In other words, the first self presents as agent; the second experiences herself as radically non-agentic. However, because of the non-agentic self stands in imagistic tension with the first, it unfortunately remains not only untheorized but unacknowledged.

The second account of the self finds its subtext not in the language of rights and principles, but in the dramatically different world of feminist reflections on "care" and "relationality".[19] According to this model, the self is understood principally in terms of her (socialized) capacity for being aware of and attending to the particular (not universal) needs of others. Rather than emphasizing the rigid boundaries of the self-possessed self, this self is relationally more fluid. Her self comes into being through the play of her interactions with those around her. Although most of the literature on care is careful to avoid essentializing this characteristic of women's identity, it is clear that undergirding the construction of this self is a set of strong assumptions about the logic of maternity; it is at heart a discourse about motherhood and nurture insofar as it draws on a morphology of reproductive care to fund its image of the self. The self is thus figured principally as the embodied site of relational engagement. She exists in the play of her responses to particularized otherness. She is the space of maternal origin.[20]

While feminists have gained much political ground through the assertion of this second model of the self—particularly with respect to the unique insights that women's socialized experience can bring to theory—its limits with respect to an aesthetic of reproductive loss should be obvious. Instead of giving us a self whose relational connection to the other is life-giving and formative, infertility, miscarriage, and stillbirth suggest the form of a self who has failed to embody the logic of maternity: the story of a self as an embodied site marked by its inability to care (in a very profound sense) for the other. Her body is a place where nature is in decline, where death dwells, where the *telos* of maternity is radically denied. Morphologically, this woman's story thus runs counter to the maternal myth undergirding

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this dimension of contemporary theory. She is the barren womb, the negated self. She refuses the logic of origins and repels the so-called psychoanalytic nostalgia for the space of undifferentiated unity.

The third, well-known account of the self in feminist theory is rooted in the post-structuralist rendering of the destabilized "subject".[21] The self posited in this story is not so much a coherent self as a constantly shifting site wherein multiple discourses and social forces converge, reconfigure, fragment, and diverge. Neither her agency nor her body serve to limit her. Post-structuralist feminism thus offers the story of the self undone, the ruptured subject, the person strewn into the chaotic coursings of history. One could even call this self the "unnarrative" woman. She resists any attempt to locate her identity in the stability presupposed by narrative assumptions about time and space.

Again, feminist theory has in recent years gained much political ground through the introduction of this particular account of the self. These gains have been most evident in its strident rejection of the feminist essentialisms that haunt both the rights and care models of the self. Thus, it is an account of the self that by breaking up narrative itself allows for the radical differences that mark women's lives to surface. These gains, however, do not temper its potential difficulty in dealing with the story of reproductive loss. Unlike the other two accounts that negate the logic of reproductive loss, this story risks inappropriately valorizing tropes of rupturing, fragmenting, "coming undone". For a woman like Wendy who was bleeding for days, a theory which hemorrhages the self can hardly be consoling. For one whose very body is being strewn into history, buried in earth, images of the post-structuralist boundless self hardly come as a comfort.

In light of the dramatic failure of these three tales of the self to address issues pertinent to reproductive loss, what I am suggesting feminist theory do? For one, I don't think that feminist theory should give up on these tales. Each has served (and continues to serve) important political functions in the women's movement and crucial pastoral functions in the lives of individual women. It thus seems to me what we need to do is add yet another tale to the mix of our stories of the self, the aesthetic drama of the self suggested by reproductive loss: the non-agentic, hopeless, fragmenting, death carrying self I have just described. What it will mean for her story to enter the stage of feminist theory, I am not yet certain; for contemporary theory on whole has a difficult time incorporating tales of loss and mourning.[22] And the tale I tell here, in its particularity, raises questions about the nature of the self that are much larger than the particular story itself; and hence incorporating it will push feminist theories of the self in substantive ways I have only hinted at here. One thing I am certain of, however, is that the Christian tradition does have resources imagining this self and perhaps it is here that feminist theory might find insights that help to move it forward on this.

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IV. Death in the Trinity: Another Story of the Self

Having laid out these feminist scripts of selfhood and the challenges that reproductive loss raises for each, let me now turn to the area of constructive doctrine and ask the question: How might feminist theology speak to experiences such as Wendy's? How might we construct doctrinal spaces that include such lived realities?

Because my theological work is most significantly informed by my own Reformed heritage, I turn to this tradition as a source for such reflections. And the first question which arises here is: Where might we best anchor this topic? What doctrinal locus might best hold and shape the unique characteristics of this grieving? One answer that immediately comes to mind (an answer that is not very Reformed) is that we should turn our thoughts to Mary, the mother of Jesus. After all, feminists have long turned to her as a source for creative insight into the place of the feminine and the maternal in the divine economy. Why not engage her figure in reflections on reproductive loss as well?

Such a turn, I have discovered, is not helpful because feminist work on Mary has fallen prey to many of the same problems I just outlined in feminist theory. The dominant themes arising in feminist accounts of her are: 1) Mary as womb, productive ground, the mother of God; 2) Mary as choosing agent, the one who, in the Magnificat, "chooses" God (the Mary of liberation theology); and 3) Mary as the site of fragmenting discourse (the Mary of Julia Kristeva's *Stabat Mater*).[23] In each of these accounts of Mary, one finds contemporary feminists attempting to retrieve her as a site of emancipatory discourse for women; but they do so in a manner that recapitulates some of the limits I have just outlined. In other words, none of the theological renderings of Mary morphologically resonates with the economy of Wendy's reproductive loss. (There is a temptation, at this point, to turn to Mary as the mother of the Jesus who died on the cross—the mother who experiences maternal loss in his crucifixion. Such a turn, however, fails because in instances of child death, the mother's barrenness and her bodily disintegration are not at issue.)

Having said this, we are still left with the question of where to turn, doctrinally, for resources that might aesthetically respond to this experience in meaningful ways. Several doctrines central to the Reformed tradition quickly suggest themselves: creation, sin, and eschatology. Creation, it seems, might be a good place to start because it would allow us to reflect upon concepts like finitude and providence. In this context, one could explore the Christian affirmation that although these losses are painful, they may well be the body's own wonderful way of dealing with pregnancies that are not biologically tenable. One could also explore the faith affirmation that because time is a gift of God, forever unfolding in God's mysterious promise, we as Christians should be aware that we do not control the future, that time

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is not ours, and that the dashed hopes of pregnancies lost were hopes that stretched beyond the bounds of our control. It strikes me, however, that while these themes are important, they would not be well received by a woman in the midst of the grief I have described. She does not want to hear that her loss is just nature "doing its thing", nor does she need a sermon on the excesses of her hope.

One could also anchor one's reflections on this grief in the doctrine of sin. Anchored here, one could wax eloquently about the various sinful social structures that create the oppressive conditions which cause this grief to occur in the first place. Here, one could explore the ways sexism, classism and especially racism and the abuse of the environment contribute to reproductive loss. But it strikes me that this locus fails to address the dimensions of reproductive loss that cannot finally be reduced to human culpability or characterized as oppression. The option of eschatology also looks promising because, in the context of this doctrine, one could look more carefully at the nature of Christian hope and explore the place held by these events in the economy of ultimate redemption. One could explore, for instance, both the problems and the promise that attend women's common belief that in heaven, these lost imagined lives are held tenderly. While there is certainly much to be said on this topic, I think that eschatology has often been used (wrongly so) as a facile palliative for those who mourn; and as such, it presents challenges of its own. For example, is it faithful or even helpful for infertile women to imagine they have children in heaven?

As these comments on doctrine suggest, I believe it is important to consider the audience to whom one is speaking when one does constructive theological reflection—an insight which, incidentally, I learned most convincingly from John Calvin.[24] In this regard, the doctrines above are not appropriate starting points for this project because their forms—the dramatic structures that drive them—do not rhetorically avail themselves (even though they might be quite true) to the context I am addressing here—women whose conception of self has been devastated by reproductive loss. As I argued earlier, what these women have told me they need first and foremost in their grief is an image that can hold their experience. As Wendy described it, she sought a vision of divinity into which she could crawl and then rest.[25] What she sought, I believe, was a theological form that might allow her to imagine "God with her" as she struggled with lost agency, dashed hopes, disintegrating boundaries, and a body that carries death. I also believe that within this image, she hoped to find at least a whisper of the grace that would heal her.

An image of God "standing with" (or perhaps "stooping and digging in the rain with") the woman ravaged by grief at the loss of her hoped-for children: Where does one turn to find this? Let me make a rather unusual suggestion by pointing us toward the doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine which, in the Reformed tradition, has been revitalized by the work of Karl

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Barth and his Lutheran student, Jürgen Moltmann. It is a doctrine which, informed by the particular character of reproductive loss, I believe, offers us—if only sketchily—a theological way into the complex of issues I have been exploring.

To begin this exploration, let me offer, in rough outline, the principal features of the doctrine of the Trinity I am working with here: a view of the Trinity that follows a rather classical logic. At the heart of this doctrine of God is the classical affirmation that the God of the Christian faith is a trinity of persons in perichoretic relation: a community of mutually indwelling persons (persons both distinct and unified). This community-of-persons-as-One-God exists eternally in a drama of relating where each offers freely to the other the fullness of its love and receives back from the other the same; each thus exists fully and freely for the sake of the other and in the other. Out of this Trinitarian community is born creation, that "other" which God creates in freedom, for the sheer sake of loving it, for the sheer sake of sharing with it this abounding Trinitarian love. This creation, in turn, is given the possibility of knowing itself as God's beloved and, in faith, offering praise to the Trinitarian God who has elected it for such glory. These beloved human creatures of God, for reasons eternally unfathomable, choose not to know this glory but to live in sin; they choose the impossible possibility. While this sinful choice does not have the power to banish God's love from the world, God laments the creature's loss and hence its disoriented wandering in a falsely constructed world where grace is unknown.

The story goes on. The Trinitarian God who eternally loves this world comes into this world as a person to walk among these beloved, fallen creatures. This coming is most fully the outworking of a love that has eternally sought to be "for the other"—to love the other unconditionally. Met by sin, however, this one who comes, Jesus Christ, is hung upon a cross to die. What happens when this one who exists eternally in the Godhead and yet occupies our humanness dies a very human death? God refuses to turn from us, even in the most brutal grip of tortured death and divine abandonment, and instead takes death into Godself. In doing so, the judge judged in our place enacts yet again the reality of the creature's redemption. What is this redemption? It is the reality that not even death on a cross can cause God to withdraw God's love from those whom God has elected. On the day of resurrection, the redemptive power of the cross is confirmed as the redemption of God.

How might this story speak to women suffering from reproductive loss? At one level, it points to the reality of God's redemptive love for creation; it is a love which extends to all persons, including women suffering from reproductive loss, and it is a love that all are invited to know, even the women who grieve deeply. In addition to this, however, I believe this classical version of the Trinity (if pushed in a particular way) also allows us to see something about God's solidarity with women grieving reproductive

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loss *specifically*. In contemporary as well as classical discussions of the Trinity, theologians have been hard pressed to give an account of what happens in the Godhead when Christ, a part of this Godhead, dies. What transpires in the Godhead when one of its members bleeds away? Theologians like Moltmann and Luther have urged us to affirm that on the cross, God takes this death into the depths of Godself.[26] The Trinity thus holds it. First person holds the Second, in its death, united with it by the power of the Spirit. But how can the living Godhead hold death within it? The tradition has told us that at this point in the story, our language breaks down, and we must simply ponder the cross and its mysteries.

Perhaps the tradition is right, but perhaps its imaginative resources have been limited by the morphological imaginations of its mostly male theologians. Perhaps what we find in this space of silence is the image of the woman who, in the grips of a stillbirth, has death inside her and yet does not die. Consider the power of this as an image for the Trinity. When Christ is crucified, God's own child dies. For the God who sent this child into the world bearing the hope of God's eternal love, this death is a death of hope, the hope that the people who see this child will believe. It is the death of a possibility that has never been, the possibility of true human community. Further, because the God who bears this loss will not turn away from God's people, God is in a sense rendered helpless in the face of this dying. God cannot stop it; and yet by letting it happen, God also bears guilt for it. In this dying, the borders of divine identity are also confused and made fluid as the One who is the source of life eternal bears now the stamp of complete, full death. In death, Christ's divine and human natures are transposed with riveting force. And perhaps most wrenching, this is a death that happens deep within God, not outside of God but in the very heart—perhaps the womb—of God. It is a death that consumes God, that God holds, making a grave of the Trinity. And yet, like the women we have heard from in my stories, this death-bearing grave of a God paradoxically does not die but lives. And She lives to love yet again and to offer to the world the gift of the future.

How might this vision of the Trinity unfold in the imaginations of women who suffer reproductive loss? It is important to say, first, that this is not an image that should encourage women to imagine their own suffering as redemptive. They are not God, and even for God, the suffering itself is not the source of our redemption; the persistence of love in the midst of suffering is. Thus, the poetic move here is not to identify these women with God or vice versa, but rather to suggest a morphological space within which they might imagine God's solidarity with them as those who lose a future they had hoped for and who carry the weight of this loss inside them. As an image of God with them, this rupturing, anti-maternal tale of the Trinity won't stop their sorrow but it might lessen their sense of isolation, which is no small step in the process of healing. Even more importantly, if a woman

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can imagine this God with her, then perhaps she can glimpse the resurrection and remember that although she may have wanted to, she did not die. And in her continued life, the future presses upon her gently. It waits for her now and will wait for her as long as she takes.

As I ponder this image of the miscarrying, stillbirthing, barren wombed God, I imagine her stooping with Wendy and I in the garden that morning … no, I imagine her holding Wendy, curling Her own ruptured body around Wendy's, and rocking her. "I know," she says. "I know." And I imagine Wendy finding great solace in her solidarity with this God who has born such loss, her sense of utter aloneness melting away. I also imagine Wendy looking at God and being even more amazed and comforted by the differences between herself and this God who holds her. Both of them grieve the loss not only of a child but of an entire world. However God, unlike Wendy, has in the depths of this loss, the power to save her, the power to love her, passionately, deeply, the power to redeem a child like Wendy who is not of God's loins but, as the Trinity curls around her, is bonded to God by a grace which is sheer gift. As to what this redemption means in Wendy's case? We have the resurrection after three days in the grave, the future that presses upon her — and we have mystery.

I should say in closing that there is more work to be done on this image of the Trinity than I can do here. Feminist theologians have already taken some strides in this direction by offering the image of the woman-with-child as an analogy for perichoretic indwelling. What these discussions miss, however, is the reality of the cross, the reality of stillbirth, infertility, and miscarriage. What they therefore miss is the rather ironic fact that the image that most effectively captures the nature of God's redeeming grace is not an image of mothering, but an image of maternal loss. It seems to me that this anti-maternal narrative holds great possibilities for feminists interested in reconceptualizing the nature of both the self and community because in its relinquishment of naturalized social bonding, it opens space for us to imagine new forms of relating, forms that take their cues from the always gifted economy of grace and not the ever-producing maternal ground. But alas, that it is just one among the many topics that must await another time.

NOTES

1 For a fuller discussion of the relation between theology and feminist theory see Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 2000).

2 To this point, little has been written about the relation between feminist theology and aesthetics, a field which I believe is ripe for further reflection. For recent works on aesthetics and theology, more generally understood, see Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in the Christian Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000); Alejandro Gracia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999); Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York, NY: Oxford University

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Press, 1999); Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI : Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980).

3 For a clinical discussion of the grief associated with reproductive loss, see Therese A. Rando, *Treatment of Complicated Mourning* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995).

4 Raymond A. Anselment, "'A Heart Terrifying Sorrow': An Occasional Piece on Poetry of Miscarriage" in *Papers on Language and Literature* Vol. 33, no. 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 13–46; Ann-Janine Morey, "In Memory of Cassie: Child Death and Religious Vision in American Women's Novels", *Religion and American Culture* Vol. 6, no. 1 (Winter 1996), pp. 87–104.

5 These claims are further complicated by forms of grief that accompany the decision of women who terminate wanted pregnancies because of health factors such as drug addiction or HIV.

6 By not including men and/or women who have abortions in my reflections, I am drawing lines that in lived experience are much messier than my neat conceptual distinctions suggest; and I hope that in the future, more theological reflections on these two topics, particularly as they relate to reproductive grief, will be undertaken.

7 For a funny and compassionate account of the relation between wanting a child and reproductive loss, see Jill Bialosky and Helen Schulman, eds, *Wanting a Child* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

8 For general discussions of the social construction of "reproductive loss" see Gayle Letherby, "The Meaning of Miscarriage", *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 16, no. 2 (1993), pp. 165–80; Linda Layne, "Motherhood Lost: Cultural Dimensions of Miscarriage and Stillbirth in America", *Women and Health* Vol. 16, no. 3/4 (Fall 1990), pp. 289–315. See also, Helen Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Sarah Matthews and Laura Wexler, *Pregnant Pictures* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000).

9 Elaine Tyler May, *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995); Laurie Lisle, *Without Child: Challenging the Stigma of Childlessness* (New York, NY: Ballatine Books, l996); Helena Michi and Naomi R. Cahn, *Confinements: Fertility and Infertility in Contemporary Culture* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

10 For example, numerous twentieth century theologians (Rahner, Tillich, Niebhur) have assumed that the quality of "self-making" is an essential feature of personhood before God. Recent work in the area of theology and disabilities has provided a much needed assessment of the limits of such language and its roots in a discourse of "efficient production".

11 See Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body : Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1997); Patricia Hill Collins, "A Comparison of Two Works on Black Family Life", *Signs* Vol. 14 no. 4 (Summer 1989), pp. 875–884.

12 On reproductive loss and technology see Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

13 See *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions*, eds, Lynn Morgan and Meredith Michaels (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

14 Although I include infertility in my discussion of reproductive loss, the "thick description" I offer here addresses more directly experiences of miscarriage and stillbirth.

15 A compelling account of the interplay between powerlessness and guilt is given in Beth Powning's, *Shadow Child: An Apprenticeship in Love and Loss* (New York, NY: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1999).

16 For an excellent discussion of the relation between hope and conceptions of selfhood, see William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1965).

17 See Linda L. Layne, "Breaking the Silence: An Agenda for a Feminist Discourse of Pregnancy Loss", *Feminist Studies* Vol. 23, no. 2 (Summer 1997), pp. 289–315.

18 Here, I refer to feminist theorists such as Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1989); Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983) and Carol Gould, *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Also see Rosalind Petchesky, *Abortion and Women's Choice: The State, Sexuality and Reproduction* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1990).

19 Here, I include theorists such as Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: A Psychological Theory of Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); *Mapping the Moral*

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Domain: A Contribution of Women's Thinking to Psychological Theory and Education, ed., Carol Gilligan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). See also *An Ethic of Care: Feminist and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed., Mary Jeanne Larrabee (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993); Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); Martha Alberton Fineman, *The Neutered Mother* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 1995).

20 For a fuller discussion of this assessment of the material origins in feminist theory, see Lynne Huffer, *Maternal Past, Feminist Futures: Nostalgia, Ethics, and the Question of Difference* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

21 The best known representative of this perspective in feminist theory is Julia Kristeva. See "Revolution in Poetic Language" and "Stabat Mater" in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed., Toril Moi (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 90–136 and pp. 160–186 respectively.

22 For a general feminist discussion of the place of tragedy in feminist theory and theology see Kathleen Sands, *Escape From Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994).

23 For an account of Mary that briefly covers each of these perspectives on her, see Mary Aquin O'Neill, "The Mystery of Being Human Together" in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed., Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1993), pp. 139–160. Also see Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex : The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976).

24 Serene Jones, *Calvin and The Rhetoric of Piety*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995).

25 See Luce Irigaray, "La Mysterique" *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 191–202.

26 This particular issue (and its thematic implications) runs through Jurgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and the Criticism of Christian Theology* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1973).

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