David Cayley
In other words, you're saying you can't make a real story out of these terms...

Barbara Duden
Yes, yes.

David Cayley
...and that very much limits what is possible.

Barbara Duden
Yes, it recreates you as a kind of modern zombie. I think there is a basic difference between experience and scientific description. Now, I love a man, but maybe this also pertains to a lesbian woman embracing another woman, that there is a basic difference if what I do there and how I judge what I do, how I look at it, how I feel it, if this comes out of the texture of me, Barbara, in this life story that I led, or if I do it in terms that comes out of description and diagnosis that is being done in a completely other realm, that is the realm of science, the professionals, textbooks. I think these two realms are in a way incompatible. Does that make sense?

David Cayley
Yes, I think so, because you're saying that all these terms are invented for purposes of prediction and control, so they're not very amenable to shaping a story.

Barbara Duden
Yes. For many years, I was active in the whole issue of decriminalization of abortion in Germany, and it seems to me that the terms in which the debate is being cast have changed very much. A friend of mine in Germany has a clinic that gives counselling to pregnant women and she said ten years ago, when women came, they would speak about the conflicts with their mother or that they slept with this man when they didn't want to, or not at that moment, or why for this or that reason they didn't use a condom or whatever. So there are all these little stories—"No, I can't have that child, I have to get rid of it,"—and they sort this out in talking with this counsellor.

Now, ten years later, women come and they use terms that are new. So they speak about this growing life in their uterus, they speak about their responsibility for "a life," they speak about an unborn life or something, and this friend told me that somehow she experiences that women talk in terms that were once used only in politics. Formerly, women were *pregnant* and that was that. Now, it's not any longer that women are pregnant but in a way they are trained, they learn to speak about that in terms in which they are the uterine environment for foetal growth or the environment for a life that is being defined in degrees of complexity of the organization of cells, to which then are ascribed these political values.

But as a woman you cannot sort this out within these terms because the realm in which you experience this has to do with your own history. So I got very interested in, say, asking myself this question: In what way is it possible politically to argue for the legitimacy of a private space that is private in a much deeper sense than, say, that privacy that was the issue of the Roe *vs.* Wade decision? What I experience as a woman looking back ten years is that what then seemed to me something like science fiction, now has become a reality. We have a completely new actor that wasn't there ten years ago and that is something that I call "the public foetus," to which there is ascribed personhood, values, the need for protection, the need to be a patient, and the ultimate value of representing a life.

There is basically no voice in which women can seriously assert that what happens in women's interior has nothing to do with all these ascriptions, that basically have a function in the ecological discourse or for the churches, or for conservative politicians. But the womb—inasmuch as it has become this public space in which there is this public foetus that then symbolizes for these different societal groups different values—has become a space for contest that it used not to be. And it seems more and more that the voice of women to speak in their own way has been muted or muffled.

David Cayley
You mentioned a minute ago a number of groups whom you intimated have a powerful interest in the public foetus. You mentioned churches and so on.

Barbara Duden
Yes.

David Cayley
What for them is the public foetus?

Barbara Duden
Last April, there was a big meeting of pro-life people in front of the White House in Washington and, taken from the description in the newspaper, it was a huge crowd that was there. The US Vice President, Quayle, addressed that crowd, speaking about the value of life to these people. Now, above these people there was a huge balloon and in this balloon there was a critter with four stump-like legs and this balloon was floating above the crowd. And this balloon seems to represent something that is real. So when little Mary, who is down there, looks up she thinks, "Oh, this is John in mother's belly," or for the church people it represents a life, or for a lawyer it represents the need of protection of a value that is being ascribed to life through law.

So we have a new situation inasmuch as the content of the pregnant womb has become visible in a public foetus that is being represented in these foetal images that we see, and these foetal images are being used by different parts of society. They represent abstract values and they give substance to these values, so that, say, the whole discussion about life within the abortion issue would not have been possible without the technologically rooted creation of these images representing the content of the womb that then can become a public emblem for other groups.

For instance, I'm interested in the function of the Catholic church in giving substance to science-generated elements of body perception today. In the abortion issue, we think that the Catholic church since the beginning of Christianity was interested in protecting life and thus being against abortion—and, of course, this is not true at all. This is not true at all because the church once was interested in the soul and in the baptism of unborn quickened beings that would have to be baptized in order to have the possibility to enter into paradise, and that was all. I mean that was the main frame in which the abortion issue—if the church was historically part of that abortion issue—took place. The church talked about a life that basically happened in paradise or in eternity or something, or after the last judgement. So what the church does actually is it's lending its power as an old, traditional institution in backing and giving substance to science-generated definitions of reality here in women's bodies.

David Cayley
I'm interested in why you think it's doing this. You've made clear why you think this public foetus, this emblem, denatures the lives of individual women. What is the interest of the many professional agencies who also adopt this emblem, why concretely do they do it?

Barbara Duden
That's difficult to answer. Certainly the professions gain from this. Say, the medical profession gains from discovering or having discovered in the last ten years a completely new realm that is this prenatal life and defining the content of the womb as a potential patient. I mean, if you go through nurse magazines, you will see this. So it's very clear that this is a whole area that then is medicalized and thus is an area in which money can be made. That's one thing.

Let me speak about Germany, which I know better. In Germany, the whole discussion about abortion has taken on an incredible importance, as in the United States. It's almost *the* issue in which the moral stance of a politician is at stake. Now, you have to ask yourself: How does it come that this society puts up the issue of abortion as the one decisive issue in which the basic values of this society are at stake?

It seems to me that this issue of abortion and the protection of unborn life has a specific symbolic function today in a world in which more and more people are afraid because of, say, the threats in the environment, or because they realize they might eat something that is bad for them, or because somehow something's weird with the weather. So in a world in which more and more people realize that something is threatened, and worry about survival, the public foetus, being an emblem for a life, gives substance to the talk of a politician that he's concerned about basic issues that are important in the survival of this society.

David Cayley
Well, it's evident that the analogy between the foetus and the spaceman is a powerful and resonant one.

Barbara Duden
I think you are right that there is an analogy, there is some kinship between the image of the public foetus, as we've become used to seeing it, and the image of the blue ball, the globe, as it was seen from outer

space—both disembedded in a way from their context, both small and threatened, all emcompassing. I think there is a kinship between these two images and the way they are being used either in the ecological discourse or now in the discourse on life that just could not take place without that image, I think, in this way.

David Cayley
What is the meaning of the term *life* as you're using it here? When you speak of the horror of people ascribing to themselves the existence within them of *a life,* what does this mean to you? I speak now in recognition that many people use this term reverently, perhaps innocently, and that for you it has a much more sinister connotation, and I'm asking you why.

Barbara Duden
Yes. I must make a detour to explain this. I learned very much from a book of Uwe Poerksen's. The book is called *Plastic Words.* Uwe Poerksen is a mediaeval historian and linguist. He analyzed a new class of words that has come up in the last ten or fifteen years; he calls them "plastic words": *sexuality, reproduction, energy, production, information, communication*—all these terms. The characteristic of these terms is that they do not define anything precisely—they do not speak about something *real.* That's one thing. At the same time, they connote, as one says, they have a specific ring—they say it's scientific; it is professional; it is...oh, he has twenty-eight characteristics for these terms. They are disembedded; they can be used in the United States or in Germany or in Japan, they are global; they do not suggest any experience—you cannot experience something like this—and I think the term *life* is now a word that belongs to this class of words that are completely void but can be used in a political discourse in which you can pump them up with any meaning that you want. Now, of course, I am not *a life:* I am Barbara, and I come out of this family, and I was born in 1942, and so on. And, I think when my mother was pregnant with me, she would not have imagined that she was carrying an unborn life—she was pregnant.

David Cayley
She was expecting.

Barbara Duden
Yes, she was expecting—that's the term. Or she was in good hope, or something. And then, in the sixties, suddenly there was this usage that there were so many American lives that were being lost in the war in Vietnam and the States started with this body count. In World War II, when they spoke about casualties, these were not lives, these were persons who had died and they had this age or this profession, and so on. And then in the sixties, the Americans started with this body counting and spoke about *lives.* For me, this term is a break with the historical tradition in which we would speak about people as persons and then the church would speak about life in the beyond, or the words of Jesus, in which he said (I know it only in German): *"Ich bin die Wahrheit und das Leben."*

David Cayley
"I am the truth, and the life."

Barbara Duden
Yes. Or, I am the one through which life comes, or something. So the church was talking about a completely different life that had to do with faith, with the incarnation, and the beyond. And now we have this secular term in which that is being fed through popular notions about biology, because *a life,* if we imagine it, is made up of biological functions. It's completely abstract, it's void of senses, personal history, or biography—it is just *a life* as the most abstract noun that speaks about a particle of a biomass.

David Cayley
And we can bespeak our reverence at the same time that we express the intention to manage it. Is that right?

Barbara Duden
Yes. Uwe Poerksen did an interesting history of this term and you can see that the term *life, living, being alive* in the nineteenth and then in the twentieth century moves from partly common parlance, partly being a term that is very strongly used in a context of faith into the realm of science, and especially biology, and then moves over now, in the last twenty years, into becoming a term that is being used to legitimize political measures.

And that is very new. It is a term that is open for all kinds of manipulation. It doesn't say anything because the moment you think about yourself or you think about your neighbours, or your friends, or your pupils, or something, you cannot conceive them as *lives,* because at the moment I conceive them as *lives,* I strip them of

all dimensions of whatever humanity meant in the past, because it's the most abstract term in this sense. And when I speak about *a life in the womb,* I speak about the unfolding of cell division.

David Cayley
In her forthcoming book, Barbara Duden talks about the origins of the contemporary use of the term *life.* She traces it back to Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, who in 1801 introduced the term *biology* into the French language. He defined the object of the new science as life.

For Duden, the invention of biology has to be understood in terms of what historian Carolyn Merchant calls "the death of nature." Pagan antiquity imagined nature as a pregnant womb. For the Christian Middle Ages, the aliveness of nature was the expression of the continuing, creative activity of God. Modern science, for the first time, attempted a mechanical explanation of nature. It eliminated from its explanations questions about the origin and purpose of existence.

Explaining nature as mechanism turns the existence of purposeful living beings into an anomaly: How could a dead cosmos produce living beings? Lamarck supposed that the secret must lie in the organization of matter. His work was the first expression of a tendency in biology called "vitalism." Vitalists have been trying unsuccessfully ever since to graft a vital principle onto a mechanical explanation of nature.

In other words, *life* in its contemporary sense expresses not the aliveness of nature, but its death. It is what Arthur Koestler once called "the ghost in the machine." The term drifted out of science, where it could never be satisfactorily defined, and into popular usage, where it became what Duden calls "an ideogram," or emblem for everything that we feel to be scarce and endangered around us.

Barbara Duden believes that understanding pregnancy in terms of ghostly abstractions like *life* undermines a woman's experience. Her insistence on this point has put her at odds with sections of the feminist movement which she herself helped to found. In the late seventies, Duden was part of a women's collective which established Germany's first feminist journal. She felt then that the heart of feminism was its witness to women's experience. Today, she feels that parts of the feminist movement have deviated from this original aim by adopting the language and methods of science.

Barbara Duden
I think it has very much to do with the academization of the movement or that this is the shadow side of women's fierce determination to make it in academia, which on one side makes a lot of sense—and actually we got pretty far with that—and on the shadow side of this is that more and more we gave up our common senses or ordinary senses, we gave up the insistence on speaking about the world in our own terms. I think one could analyze the feminist writing on reproduction in the last ten years as a gradual take-over of professional and scientific terms and thus also meaning being given to women's bodily interior within these terms.

Even resistance against these new technologies reinforces the hold of these terms, because arguing against the use or misuse of reproductive technologies gives substance and everyday reality to these scientific terms, and in this way almost feminizes them and thus helps to destroy the borderline between a woman's personal experience and a realm of reproduction.

David Cayley
So to speak of reproductive choice, even though you imagine you speak of it in the interests of women, is already to defeat the interests of women. That's what you're saying.

Barbara Duden
Right. If you cast what it means *hoping to be pregnant, avoiding to be pregnant, taking contraceptives, having an abortion,* and so on, if you cast this in terms of reproductive choice, you put the individual woman into a realm of the market in which there is choice and so you can have a car, you can have a child, and that means, in a very deep way, transform and recreate women's self-experience.

David Cayley
Why do you think there has been this blindness in feminism to the dangers that seem so evident to you?

Barbara Duden
I think this has a lot to do with class and education. A lot of feminists are middle-class women. I think it has to do with the position of science and uncriticized science

as being the main part of the worlview of these women; it has to do with a middle-class lifestyle. I mean the whole society sweats this out, so why should women be more intelligent? I think we fell into the trap that this society is just opening. But I think it does something to women that is particularly vicious. Yes, particularly vicious.

David Cayley
In your own history as a feminist, where are the turning points?

Barbara Duden
I can look back over fifteen years of involvement with women's issues. When I joined with friends in Berlin to take up the issue of housework, then there wasn't yet a women's movement, and that's very difficult to believe today because afterwards it always seems like something natural that has always been there. I was working with other women to get a feminist monthly journal on the way and we were very successful. And there I learned for the first time that, without an institutional backing, just right out from scratch and without any experience, we could just *do* it—to make a journal, to learn something about printing, to be able to write yourself, to be able to organize the distribution of a journal like that—so that, if you study what you want to do, you can do it. So I think that was very important in its stance against the necessity that whatever we do today is possible only if there is an institution who pays for it, who gives the knowledge, and so on. That was in the mid-seventies.

I was very much involved in writing about the history of housework and I did this with a friend; we were very interested in showing that women's unpaid work was not something universal. The very nature of work like cooking, tending of children, cleaning, and so on, changes within industrial society. It has a history. It comes into being in the nineteenth century. Women did not always do it. They definitely didn't do it always in the same way. It didn't have the same meaning and function that it gradually took on in the course of the nineteenth century.

Now, while I was doing this, I was part of a campaign that was called "wages for housework," because our analysis came to the conclusion that the weakness or powerlessness of women's situation has very much to do with the unpaid nature of their work. And I wrote an article that was called "Labour as Love, Love as Labour: The History of Housework in Capitalism," and we ended with the claim that all the many, many different activities that a woman does during a day, especially if she has children, and tending for the old, and cooking, and so on, that all that is called housework, all this should be paid.

During this period I met Ivan Illich. He was one of the few men that I knew that took our analysis seriously and he started writing *Gender*. The book came out in 1982. Now, I was furious with that book for two reasons: because Ivan Illich in this *Gender* book has a theory about the past and a theory about the present. Both theories contradicted very much the analysis and the conclusions that I had reached at that point. We had analyzed the history of the West in terms of women's discrimination, of the subordination of women, of patriarchal power over women, and so on. That was during the first waves of academic feminism where we generally, I think, subscribed to a general victimization of women eternally, or woman as a universal victim. And Ivan reversed it with the *Gender* book.

David Cayley
Illich's book argued that feminist historians were analyzing the past within categories completely alien to that past. In speaking, for example, of women's work, they presumed that the subsistence activities of women in the past could be understood within this abstract and universal category. But, according to Illich, all pre-modern societies were divided by gender into separate but complementary domains: There were tools that men can grasp and tools that women could grasp; customs of men and customs of women; there was no human being as such and, therefore, no work as such. Projecting modern categories onto the past, Illich argued, distorted its character and obscured any possible basis for a challenge to the present. Barbara Duden began to see just how corrosive modern categories might be, not just for the historian but also for the ways we live together.

Barbara Duden
When I was living with eight other women in a big flat in Berlin, at some point it was almost impossible to cook something for the other women without having this in mind: that now this is housework that I am doing and actually it is work that I can analyze in terms of time,

and I should use my time in a more productive way. So mentally the analysis of housework, inasmuch as we analyzed it as housework, recreated it as one category of work. But you could say: This is being alive as a woman—being with friends, or being with neighbours, or cooking something or doing something. So in our analysis we were devaluing activities that are important and have to be seen in the weft and warp of social relationships, of friendships, of obligations to one's children, of obligations to oneself, to friends, to a husband; and we conceptually recreated housework as another example of this abstract category of work out of which this society is being built, and we continued with this general devaluation in this society in which what counts is what makes money, what counts is what gives status within an institution.

David Cayley
Barbara Duden concluded that modern scientific categories denature both history and experience. She returned to the past with fresh eyes. In her book *The Woman Beneath the Skin,* she tried to grasp the body experiences of early eighteenth-century women as something peculiar and specific to their own era. Instead of understanding the past in terms of the present, she tried to use the experiences of women in the past to undermine the claim that modern science offers a universally valid form of knowledge.

Barbara Duden
I choose women's bodies as a paradigm, as a prime example, to understand something about the redefinition of woman through modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth century. I think one could have taken up other examples, like work or something, but I chose the scientific recreation of women's flesh as an example. So I tried moving in two directions. I did history in order to gain a distance from the present, to familiarize myself with completely different self-perceptions of women in the past; I tried to learn something by familiarizing or making friends with these women in the past in order to gain a standpoint from which to look back from the early eighteenth century into the twentieth century. At the same time I used my experience as a modern woman—because I can't just get out of my flesh of course—in order to understand something about the newness of the modern situation by looking back to these women in the past. So I'm always moving, say, on two legs: I move in the early eighteenth century and at the same time of course I'm completely stuck in the 1990s.

David Cayley
Is this practice of being able to move, of being able to see beyond the horizon of our own assumptions, is this for you an indispensable experience, if we are to get out of this box that you feel that we're in? Is there any other way than this? Is this the way to do it?

Barbara Duden
For me it is the way. For me definitely it is the way because you must have a point from which to look. So, in order to create a distance from the assumptions inherent in modern categories and definitions, you must have a stance. So one possibility of course is how you feel in your own flesh, I think, that's one possibility. Now, I am an academic and a historian of body perceptions so I choose a different road in going back to the past.

David Cayley
But you've already said that you meet students who feel in their flesh that they might have a sugar high or that they're carrying a foetus. This is what they experience.

Barbara Duden
Yes. I learned about this while being in the United States. When I came from Europe, this issue wasn't as clear to me as it is now. When I went back to Germany, I tried to make a public stance within the abortion issue and then within the issue of reproductive technologies, definitely as a historian. I tried to argue from the position of the women in the past and using them as an example to say: Look, there have been completely other ways in feeling as a woman.

But I might as well do this by taking, say, a black woman's experience seriously, speaking with her and trying to understand this different way without devaluing it through scientific or middle-class definitions. I mean, the United States is full of still different worlds where you have a past that is present in different social classes, or in different ethnicities. When I was teaching, I had black women students, and I was really struck that one thing that they learn in an academic setting is that everything their mother has told them is wrong. So what the educational process—because it is a process unfortunately—what the educational process does is it

devalues what they bring as experience and what they bring that has been part of their culture. So what the educational process does is uprooting this experience and devaluing it.

Now, I have been teaching this course, "History of Body Experience," and I have been teaching this course on social creation of woman as a scientific fact, and it's very interesting how much you actually can enter into discussion with these students and help Tracy learn that this assumed sugar high is an ascription of a scientific definition in which she finally believed and that she incarnates in some way. And the kind of teaching that I do has very much to do with this. Yes.

Lister Sinclair
On *Ideas* tonight, you've been listening to a conversation between David Cayley and German historian Barbara Duden. Barbara Duden is the author of *The Woman Beneath the Skin,* published by Harvard University Press. Tonight's broadcast concludes our two-part series. It was written and presented by David Cayley. Technical production by Lorne Tulk; production assistants Gail Brownell and Faye Macpherson. The executive producer of *Ideas* is Bernie Lucht.

Transcription by Hedy Muysson.