

Once and Future

Feminist

Merve Emre

EDITOR

with Silvia Federici,
Cathy O'Neil, Sarah Sharma,
and Andrea Long Chu



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Editors' Note

Deborah Chasman & Joshua Cohen

HOW CAN WOMEN possibly be free if they must carry the burden of reproductive labor? In her *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), radical feminist Shulamith Firestone raised this question and argued that technology could provide a promising answer: artificial wombs would provide a way out of a world of gender hierarchies. With the proliferation of assisted reproductive technologies such as egg freezing and surrogacy, it might look like we are making progress.

Merve Emre, our guest editor and lead author, is not so sure. "People's bodies," she observes, "are unruly sites for politics." Techno-utopias may have their attractions, but they flatten human life. Drawing on personal narratives, Emre explores how technologies shape real experiences of reproduction and care, and how they obscure and sometimes worsen inequalities—in time, money, kinship, and access to healthcare. Such stories are heterogenous, individual, particular to place and person. Can an egalitarian and maximally inclusive feminism emerge from these stories? What would it look like?

Many of Emre's respondents share deep concerns about the promise of techno-fixes: they turn pregnancy into a commercial transaction, transform babies into commodities, fetishize genetic perfection, echo histories of racial exclusion and state violence—or simply don't work. These critiques also suggest—as does Emre—rich sources for alternate visions, including the contributions of black women and queer communities in modeling and theorizing the kind of elective kinship and social structures that might sustain baby-making and distribute its burdens fairly.

With more than 2,000 kids forcibly separated from their parents, our current realities are painfully distant from these hopeful prospects. But utopian imagination is perhaps most important precisely when the gulf between real and ideal is greatest.

Other contributors to this issue also work at the rich intersection of technology, work, and feminism. James Chappel asks why feminist concerns are so rarely attentive to older women—whose reproductive labor is finished and who are especially vulnerable in an economy with so much precarious work. Sarah Sharma looks to Silicon Valley and “Mommy apps” whose designs debase women by treating them as outmoded technologies. She asks how we might reimagine technology without gender hierarchies. In a speculative story on sex robots, Cathy O’Neil gives us a glimpse of that future.

Finally, two contributors look back toward the future. Jill Richards interviews legendary activist Silvia Federici, a member of New York’s Wages for Housework in the 1970s, about her vision of women’s liberation. Michael Bronski recalls Gay Liberation’s vision of a society in which gay men and women raised children together. Building from the past and from the margins, they imagine a world more generous, decent, and humane than our own—a society organized around elective kinship and the belief that our children are our common responsibility.

On Reproduction

Merve Emre

ACCORDING TO the New York papers, the first artificial womb was discovered—not invented—on the night of February 24, 1894, in a “queer little shop” on East Twenty-Sixth Street. The shop’s owner, a reclusive scientist named William Robinson, was roused from sleep by the personal physician of E. Clarence Haight, a Madison Avenue millionaire whose wife had died in childbirth and whose daughter had been born weighing less than two pounds. Desperate to save the baby, the physician begged Robinson to give him something to keep her warm. Robinson hurried to the back of his shop and emerged with what he called his “artificial womb”: a black steamer trunk with a sliding window cut into the lid, a cruder version of the infant incubators soon to debut at the Great Industrial Exposition of Berlin in 1896. “The Little Tot Has Been Nearly Three Weeks in the Artificial Womb,

and the Prospects Are That It Will Live to Begin Life in the Normal Way About Three Weeks More," reported the Daily News on March 16.

Like many advances in reproductive technology, the artificial womb lent itself first to speculative fiction, then to scientific research, and finally to feminist theory. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the artificial womb appeared in hundreds of pulpy newspaper stories and dystopian novels, including *Brave New World* (1932), in which ectogenesis—the development of embryos outside the uterus—enables the mass production of human beings. In 1952 the New York State Medical Society started designing an artificial womb that doctors imagined as a “goldfish bowl filled with chemical fluids,” connected to a life-support machine, that would “do the work of” a human mother. They did not succeed, but in 1962, doctors at the Royal Caroline Hospital in Sweden announced that they had, unveiling their artificial womb that “brought back to life babies born dead” and, more horrifying still, “babies legally aborted from their mothers.” This was the same year that expectant mother Sherri Finkbine learned that the child she was carrying would likely be born with severe deformities; after a highly publicized request for an abortion was denied by her home state of Arizona, she flew to Sweden—to the same hospital where the artificial womb was being housed—to terminate her pregnancy. In the face of growing outrage over restrictive abortion laws, the artificial womb’s promise of creating life without any woman’s consent began to look increasingly dystopian. By the mid-1960s, research into artificial wombs sputtered and then died for a time.

It was not until 1970 that radical feminist Shulamith Firestone imagined a future in which technologies of artificial insemination, test-tube fertilization, artificial placentas, and parthenogenesis (“virgin birth,” she calls it in her manifesto *The Dialectic of Sex*) would liberate women from reproductive work. In the right hands, Firestone insisted,

artificial wombs and other reproductive technologies could dismantle hetero-patriarchal sex roles. They could make the grinding work of pregnancy—nausea and exhaustion, labor and delivery, postnatal recovery and postpartum depression, nursing and around-the-clock childcare—just one option among many for how to create and care for children. The problem, as Firestone saw it, was that research on reproductive technologies was performed only incidentally in the interests of women. The development of the artificial womb, for instance, had to be justified as a lifesaving device for premature babies and not as a laborsaving device for women who simply did not want to do the work of gestation. “Until the decision not to have children or to have them by artificial means is as legitimate as traditional childbearing, women are as good as forced into their female roles,” she warned.

Firestone’s enthusiasm for new reproductive technologies was met with incredulity, scorn, and outrage among many of her fellow radical feminists. Some criticized her techno-utopian naïveté; others doubled down on the “natural” as the feminist antithesis to technological dehumanization. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone dismisses the natural as part of a “reactionary hippie-Rousseauian Return-to-Nature,” a dangerous ideology that transfigures discomfort and risk into an essential female experience, one women can harness as a source of personal empowerment and political emancipation. Firestone mocks the mystifying maneuvers of the natural in a brief, funny, and (to my mind) fairly accurate thought experiment on what it feels like to push a baby out of your vagina.

Like shitting a pumpkin, a friend of mine told me when I inquired about the Great-Experience-You’re-Missing. What’s-wrong-with-shitting-shitting-can-be-fun says the School of Great Experience. It hurts, she says. What’s-wrong-with-a-little-pain-as-long-as-it-doesn’t-kill-you? answers the School. It is boring, she says. Pain-can-be-interesting-as-an-experience

says the School. Isn't that a rather high price to pay for interesting experience? she says. But-look-you-get-a-reward, says the School: a-baby-all-your-own-to-fuck-up-as-you-please. Well that's something, she says. But how do I know it will be male like you?

It is hardly surprising that the School of Great Experience turns out to be male, and the imperative to reproduce joyfully a persistent strain of internalized misogyny masquerading as liberation. The idea that women were made to shoulder the burdens of physical and social reproduction without complaint or recompense—that they were made to feel pain happily, creatively, and disproportionately—fails as the starting point for an emancipatory politics.

Nonetheless the discourse of the natural has continued to grow, invading mainstream debates about reproduction with an exclusionary and consumerist logic that has only intensified since Firestone published *The Dialectic of Sex*. “Natural childbirth,” “natural breastfeeding,” “natural parenting,” “nature-based schooling”—these practices preoccupy women who have the dumb luck of procreating in the Global North and the privilege of pretending they are procreating “in Eden,” as one manufacturer of “all-natural” prenatal supplements promises on the side of its plastic pill bottle. There are hundreds of thousands of videos online in which attractive, mostly white women stand in well-appointed apartments and promote “superfoods” for boosting fertility, \$500 hypnosis tutorials, and expensive tubs for guaranteeing a “beautiful water birth.” Some offer videos of the ecstatic DIY births of their own children. (No video is more than 25 minutes long.) One blogger soothes her anxious viewers by reciting the transcendent vision of a shared “female biology” in Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976): “the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating from the clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body.”

It is easy to poke fun at the natural in its most obvious, dated, and ironic manifestations; this is the natural as a lifestyle choice rather than a political problem. It is harder to see how its pre-technological imagination, even in its more innocuous or understated forms—promoting apps that help women plot their most fertile days, attributing maternal bonding to hormones, insisting that “breast is best,” ignoring the existence of non-heterosexual reproduction—occludes the many individuals who carry or care for children. They include lesbians, trans people, and gender non-conforming people, as well as single women, women who cannot conceive or carry, women who have had miscarriages, adoptive parents, mothers of premature babies, and surrogates. As Donna Haraway points out in “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1984), the idiom of the natural makes sexual reproduction look like the only option rather than *one kind* of reproductive strategy, underwritten by the apparent truism that sex and sex roles are “organic aspects of natural objects.” At the same time, it also makes sexual reproduction look like an autonomous, unassisted act that gives certain women privileged (and often tormented) knowledge of how maternity, kinship, and care work.

Yet feminism has not done a good enough job articulating what alternate strategies of reproduction may be. In part this is a problem of thought, in part a problem of genre. From Firestone to Haraway to Laboria Cuboniks (an anti-naturalist, gender-abolitionist collective of “daughters of Haraway”), the manifestos issued by feminists often call for universal access to reproductive technologies, biotechnical interventions, hormones, and “endocrinological knowhow” (including about gender hacking). What necessarily gets lost in these manifestos’ universalizing are the differences in how particular technologies calibrate particular peoples’ experiences of reproduction and care; how they bring to light vast structural inequalities of time, money, kinship, healthcare, legal protections, and bodily integrity; and how, when these inequalities

become palpable enough, the desire to reproduce naturally can undercut a progressive politics of reproduction.

To appreciate all this—and to figure out what to do about it—we need narrative.

S IS THIRTY-FOUR YEARS OLD and has recently separated from her partner. She lives in San Francisco and works at a biotech named one of the “100 Best Places to Work for Women” by *Forbes*. S’s company offers its employees many perks to help maintain a “good work-life balance”—employee sports teams, carwash and bicycle repair facilities, on-site haircuts and spa treatments—but the perk I am interested in is the \$20,000 lifetime medical cap for elective oocyte cryopreservation, better known as “egg freezing.”

When Facebook, Apple, and Yahoo all announced in 2015 that they would start offering an “expanded suite of family benefits,” it was egg freezing—not on-site childcare or adoption assistance—that captured the public’s attention as “tech’s hottest new perk.” It was also egg freezing that attracted criticism for its classist and anti-feminist politics, its shoddy scientific underpinnings, and its antagonism to a natural timeline of motherhood. “Freezing your eggs might seem like a cool way to defer motherhood,” wrote Suzanne McGee in the *Guardian*. “When you’re ready, just thaw ’em out, fertilize ’em, implant ’em and bingo—you’re a mom!” McGee’s contempt was directed not at the companies but at the women who would opt to freeze their eggs—women whose choices, she implied, could only be explained by their folksy ignorance of just how superior natural conception is. As was the case with many debates over reproduction, what started out as a critique of capitalism quickly became a critique of women’s choices.

S, who was involved with designing and instituting the company's egg freezing policy, dismisses McGee's argument as "ridiculous" and thinks critics such as McGee are ignorant of what is involved in egg freezing at a corporate and individual level. Until very recently, S tells me, California state law mandated that the company's private insurance provider cover infertility treatments regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Many insurers, however, continued to make coverage contingent on a medical infertility diagnosis: a doctor had to confirm that a couple had not achieved "clinically or biochemically recognizable pregnancy after 12 months of intercourse." S's company had a large and active LGBT association that had repeatedly pointed out to management that it was impossible for gay, lesbian, and trans employees to procure a diagnosis of infertility. They wanted the company to step in where the state could not, rectifying the discrimination that affected them directly. It is not clear how long or how hard the association pushed, but in 2015 Google and LinkedIn announced that they would cover two rounds of elective egg freezing for all employees and S's company followed suit to stay competitive.

Her frozen eggs are a happy product of Silicon Valley's marriage of capitalist competition and social justice; she sees no reason to apologize for this, and she grows defensive when I ask. She tells me she has a half-dozen friends who have frozen their eggs and have paid for it out of pocket, cashing out savings accounts, borrowing money from family and friends, or taking on thousands of dollars of credit card debt to cover it. "Cover what?" I ask, and I am embarrassed to realize that I have very little idea of what the treatment entails.

S's explanation is swift and precise. Exactly one month before the treatment starts, she tells me, you go to the UCSF Center for Reproductive Health—a well-oiled machine, S explains, where patients are

dispatched quickly and brusquely and you rarely see the same doctor twice. The doctor checks your uterus, uterine cavity, and ovaries with a transvaginal ultrasound. She judges where you are in your menstrual cycle by the size of your follicles, the round fluid-filled sacs that house the eggs the treatment will target. If you are on birth control, now is when you stop taking your pills; if you have an IUD, you make an appointment to have it removed. If all you are doing is having your eggs frozen, you attend the first half of a class on self-injections; the second half is for women who are ready to have the embryos fertilized and implanted immediately after retrieval, women who are ready to become mothers. At the class, you learn how to properly wash, dry, and glove your hands; how to disinfect bottles of hormones with evocative names such as Gonal-F, Menopur, and Lupron; how to prepare the needles you will plunge into your stomach every night at exactly the same time, aiming for the soft flesh between your abdominal muscles; how to prepare yourself for the bruises, the weight gain, the mood swings, the exhaustion, the risk of ovarian swelling and pain (a condition known as ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome or OHSS), and—although S does not say it, I can hear the nervousness on the steely edge of her voice—the possibility that the procedure will fail.

Once you begin the injections, she continues, you return to the clinic every other day for an ultrasound and a blood draw. Most of the women are there with partners—it is still unusual to see a woman there by herself—and S, like her friends and colleagues, is sensitive to the idea that she is not having a “normal baby” the “normal” or “natural way.” They fear that bringing a child into the world with the help of sophisticated technology places her in a compromised class of mothers. I am struck by how many of the women I speak to accidentally refer to ART as “artificial reproductive technology” rather than “assisted reproductive technology,” the crude nature/culture dichotomy announcing itself with a slip of the tongue.

To reproduce is always to begin to mark time according to a series of technologically mediated discoveries about your body: four weeks before a woman's hCG levels are high enough to bind to the man-made antibodies in the pigment on a pregnancy test; twenty weeks before a sonogram can check for anatomical irregularities and determine the sex of your child; twenty-eight weeks to viability, though only then with the help of breathing tubes, catheters, incubators. But time changes when the technologies involved in reproduction change. There is an unforgiving choreography to freezing your eggs, S tells me. You begin to measure the days and the months not by the winding down of an imaginary biological clock, but by the nightly recurrence of needles prepared and disposed; the daily rhythm of blood drawn and screened, follicles measured and counted. Every afternoon between the hours of 1:00 and 2:00, you stare at your phone, hoping the clinic's number does not flash, hoping an automated voice does not inform you that there is a problem with your hormone levels and your eggs—or your body—are in jeopardy. Every night you inject yourself at 9:00 sharp and fall asleep an hour later.

You begin to count the passing days by what you are not allowed to do during them. You cannot smoke. You are encouraged not to drink. You cannot exercise for fear of ovarian torsion, a twisting of the ovary that cuts off its blood flow, inducing severe pain and vomiting. You cannot under any circumstances have sex. The risk of fertilization is far too great and, ironically, nothing could be less desirable or more dangerous than getting pregnant. S's physician tells her that, if she is lucky, there are upward of twenty-five eggs growing in her ovaries, and he pauses to let the horror of accidental fertilization sink in. The compression of reproductive time in the present is accompanied by a corresponding expansion of reproductive scale: from one unknown offspring to twenty-five forking paths into parenthood, from one unknown future to a multiplicity of futurities.

Toward the end of S's treatment, the rhythm of testing and scanning picks up; the measurement of time becomes more incremental and more precise. Now she goes to the clinic every day for an ultrasound. The doctors track her follicles closely to predict the day they can retrieve the maximum number of eggs. Optimization is key: if they perform the retrieval too early, they will not get as many mature eggs as they would like; if they wait too long, some of the eggs will get too big and self-destruct. They set a day and, exactly seventy-two hours before, S injects herself with a "trigger shot," a hormonal agent that induces "final follicular maturation." Then she waits. There is nothing left for her to do but arrive at the clinic, submit to anesthesia, and sleep while the doctor passes a needle through the top of her vagina, into her ovaries, and aspirates the eggs from her body.

S undergoes the treatment twice. Her doctor retrieves twenty-five eggs in total, fifteen of which are viable. Fifteen months' worth of genetic material produced and harvested in only three months is a pretty decent yield, her doctor assures her, and anyway, she has reached her medical cap on elective treatments after two rounds. She calls these fifteen eggs her "insurance policy," a strategy for hedging against an unknowable future. They allow her to mute the questions she no longer wants to think about: *Will I have a long-term partner? Will I have a hard time getting and staying pregnant? Will I deliver a healthy baby?*

A lot of people ask her why she doesn't just have the baby. Before there was a timeline, they insist. Now there is none. "The eggs should be liberating," she sighs, but it is clear both to her and to me that her internalized sense of what is normal and what is not—what kind of family arrangement she desires—is achingly out of sync with the emancipatory promise of technology. She has greater control over her reproductive future than ever before, yet she seems even more shackled to the specter of the natural now that the choice is hers to make.

B, A FORTY-YEAR-OLD WRITER and university lecturer, waits for the next installment of her book advance so she can pay off the debts she has incurred for her in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments. Unlike S, whose egg freezing was fully covered by her employer, B's IVF was financed through small loans from friends and colleagues. The same women who lent her money also picked her up from the doctor's office after her retrievals. They covered her classes when the pain from the hormonal therapy became debilitating, when lying flat was the only position that made sense. When she miscarried after her first and only intrauterine insemination (IUI), they were the only women she told, until one day she found the private knowledge of her pain too onerous. She wrote a post on Facebook about what she had endured: hormones that were poorly calibrated, a humiliating insemination, a miscarriage. "For the possibility of romantic love, I won't even take one evening off from TV," she concluded. "For the possibility of this other kind of love, I will apparently do everything."

There is a peculiar invisibility to undergoing IVF as a single person. The stories we read and the pictures we see on clinic websites are almost always of couples: two handsome people—a man and a woman, two men, two women—beam as they open their arms to a happy, impossibly healthy-looking child, preparing to enclose her in the safe harbor of a clearly defined family. We look at couples without children and wonder: *Do they want them? Are they having trouble?* But it does not occur to people when they speak to a single woman that she too might be trying to have a child—or that she might have lost one.

When B miscarried, she was in the middle of a job interview. She knew what was happening to her, but she had no idea how to express it. She spoke and smiled through the pain as women so often do; she got the job. Yet the intensity of her loss was at odds with the invisibility of

her desire to have a child. Even when we talk, she seems unsure how much grief she is entitled to voice. “It was physically and emotionally horrible in a way that feels disproportionate,” she tells me. “But my doctor kept telling me that it was a nearly universal experience for people with my kind of reproductive system.”

B comes from a family that she describes as “hyperfertile”: she is one of six children and in her family, it is far more likely that someone will get pregnant by accident than struggle to conceive. When she went in for her first evaluation, her follicle count was unusually high for her age. The doctors who saw her kept smiling and complimenting her ovaries. “Look at those follicles!” one exclaimed. “Look at them just doing their thing!”

She was proud to hear that having children might be something she was made to do well. She had always known she wanted to care for others, but she had never felt a strong biological imperative to give birth or have a child who was genetically related to her. She considered adopting at first. She went to a ten-week training for potential foster parents, but she soon learned that the important part of becoming a foster parent was guarding yourself against attachment. In the state where B lives, parents whose children are placed in foster care have a year to demonstrate that they are fit to care for their children. As the foster parent, you are instructed to root for the parents. The training teaches you how to create barriers to love, how to preemptively detach and grieve the loss of a child who, you are told repeatedly, was never yours to begin with. B did not want her inaugural experience of parenting to be a year-long rehearsal for losing and letting go.

Unlike S, B’s insemination took place at a teaching hospital with medical students crowded around her, watching and taking notes and whispering. B has a retroverted uterus—the top of it tips backward rather than forward—and this confused the young male resident who

was responsible for performing the IUI. After two unsuccessful attempts at placing the sperm inside B, he grew flustered. "What the hell is going on here?" he kept muttering in B's direction, until the supervising ob-gyn, a woman, intervened and inseminated B on the first try. B got pregnant and, though she lost the pregnancy, though the world seemed to shrink from her obliterated, exhausted body and she from it, her doctor was eager to try again. "We could totally just keep doing IUI, and it will probably work out," she prompted B, who could not bear the idea of it. If she was going to get pregnant again, she wanted it to happen outside her body first where the viability of embryo could be determined in advance of implantation; she wanted gradual attrition—the calculated paring down of her eggs and embryos after tests and screens—not sudden and singular loss.

She opted for IVF and, after only a week of injections, looked in the mirror to find an altered version of herself staring back: a woman who had gained fourteen pounds, who looked like she was already half-way through a pregnancy. After two weeks, her heart raced when she climbed the stairs to her apartment. She could feel her ovaries growing suddenly alert to gravity, tugging at her and weighing down her steps. She imagined the pain as a prize for how well her doctor said her body was responding to the hormone treatments, reassuring her that all the side effects were "normal," even if normal felt unsafe.

The next ultrasound showed that she was on the verge of ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome. There was an alarming amount of fluid splashing around inside her ovaries and now her heart beat so fast when she walked that she worried she might have a heart attack. Her doctor prescribed her a different trigger shot, one that she warned would substantially reduce B's overall egg haul. It struck her as an especially cruel irony: her acute responsiveness to the treatment meant that viable eggs would have to be sacrificed to keep her healthy when all along she had

known that something was wrong, that the hormones had pushed her body into alien territory.

A different male resident performed the retrieval and, even through the haze of fentanyl, it hurt. He did not seem bothered, but the doctor supervising him watched B's face closely and, after a moment, asked if she wanted to hold hands. The women's fingers stayed intertwined the entire time the resident retrieved B's eggs—twenty-two in all. Later B would learn that only eleven fertilized into embryos; only six made it through the preimplantation genetic screening; and only three turned out to be free of any chromosomal abnormalities. There was a roughly 50 percent chance that one of the three embryos would implant successfully. When the doctor called with the results of the genetic screen, she asked B if she wanted to know the sexes of her embryos. "I have two girls and a boy," B told me, her voice swelling with pride.

When we spoke, B was still trying to decide when to do her implantation. She was just about to switch jobs, and her new employer would not offer her paid maternity leave until she had been in her position for at least a year. As a single parent, she needed paid leave; she could not risk delivering a baby even one day before the twelve-month mark. She could see the years piling on, pushing her past forty to forty-one, forty-two, forty-three—and even further if she wanted to have more than one child.

I ask her what she will do. She sighs and says, "I just have to move forward, whatever that will mean." People keep assuring her that she is in control of the process. But there are constraints—biological, material, emotional, financial—guiding and shaping her choices, and these have attuned her to a new type of "physical impossibility," an added layer of responsibility she must bear in navigating a world of unknowns. "It feels so wrong," she tells me. "But I guess that's what normal feels like."

N, A GRADUATE STUDENT, and K, a photographer, always assumed they would both get pregnant, perhaps even at the same time, and have more than one child. It seemed both fair and efficient to divide the labor. Yet N, who has had chronic medical issues since she was a teenager, was told by her doctor that carrying a pregnancy would be far too dangerous for her. The fertility specialist they visited in 2010 found her frustration amusing. “Why don’t you just use her?” he joked with N, pointing at K. “There are two uteruses in this relationship. I don’t see what the problem is.”

In 2011 K had a sudden and severe uterine hemorrhage and was hospitalized for seven days. K’s doctors presented her and N with the option of an emergency hysterectomy—the safest option, they insisted, even if it meant that neither of them could ever become pregnant, making surrogacy or adoption their only options for having a family. They sought the advice of a high-risk obstetrician who insisted that the couple should not reproduce biologically. “You’re too overweight,” she told K, adding that because K is prone to depression and anxiety, she could pass her “mental illness” on to their children. The women were crushed, then furious, then motivated to act without their doctors’ blessings.

For some time, K and N had serious misgivings about the political valences of their decision. As a scholar of queer theory and disability studies, N had read a half-dozen feminist books on lesbian conception from the 1980s and ’90s, many of which refused to acknowledge the medical or technological dimension of fertility except to critique it. “We don’t have fertility problems, we just need sperm,” N jokes. She was tortured by the argument for some time, wondering if she and K should avoid the hospital’s sperm bank and ask a friend to donate informally. But the legal complications of a known donor were terrifying: paternity claims, visitation rights, a child dragged in and out of family court. They decided to use the sperm bank.

As a lesbian who had never had any sexual contact with a man, K found the idea of sperm insertion uncanny—a little bit funny, even. She discovered that she had expected some flicker of romance or magic to accompany the lead up to conception. But everything in the clinic conspired against it: the sterility of the exam room, the metallic cool of the speculum, the resident who barely knew where her cervix was when he examined her during her painful preliminary visit.

N sat on a chair next to her and listened as the resident explained the process to K.

“In three days, we’re going to do the insemination,” he said. “So we’re going to need a sample from your partner.”

The women exchanged confused looks. What sample could he possibly need? Blood? Urine? The resident persisted, explaining that they would collect the sample and store it until the insemination. Before the women could ask him to explain, he left the room. It was only after they had left the clinic that they realized he had assumed N was K’s friend, there in place of her husband, whom he must have believed was at work or too embarrassed to come.

N and K tried IUI five times. Five times, the resident who performed the insemination assumed that N and K were friends or sisters and ignored N as he inseminated K. Five times, a single pink line appeared on the pregnancy test: “not pregnant.” N wondered if the persistent negatives were a sign that they were not meant to have a child; K, who had grown up religious, thought that perhaps God was telling them that they did not deserve one. Neither of the women was used to beating back the internalized homophobia that had suddenly taken root in their minds, transforming the decision to have children into a referendum on their life together.

Nor were they used to the unsolicited advice they would receive from people who barely knew them or their story. “Why don’t you

just adopt?” suggested more than one acquaintance—as if adoption were easier or faster or less emotionally fraught than trying to have a child through IVF. “People do not run up to pregnant women and ask, ‘Why didn’t you just adopt?’” N mimics, strained with impatience and injustice. “We cannot have a biological child that is both of ours,” she tells me.

After the IUIs failed, they proceeded to IVF, borrowing money from N’s family to pay for K’s therapies and procedures. (N’s brother and sister-in-law, who were undergoing IVF at the same time, were fully covered by their insurance.) K was taken off her antidepressants and put on Lupron, which suppresses menstruation. N felt guilty that it was K, and not her, who had to endure the anxiety and sleeplessness caused by the medication changes. To reassure themselves that everything they were experiencing was normal, K and N joined several online groups for women who were TTC: “Trying to Conceive.” There was an Instagram community of over a million people that they found through hashtags such as #ttc, #ttccommunity, and #ttcsisters. The photos were posted by mostly straight, mostly white women, and they included inspirational quotes (“Stay patient and trust your journey”), jokes (“Aunt Flo: the most hated bitch in TTC”), prominent baby bumps, and successful #ivfbabies and #iuibabies in their mothers’ arms. K also joined a smaller queer TTC Facebook group of 1,200 members, almost exclusively lesbians who liked to joke about the male doctors who mistook their partners for friends or sisters. There was a group specific to K’s fertility clinic, which she joined but tried to participate in as little as possible. Most of the women in it were in the “shit-out-of-luck phase,” she told me. Many had maxed out their egg retrievals—the medical cap is four—and were running out of embryos to implant. K found the community claustrophobic, a place where women spun their wheels, madly projecting their grief onto strangers.

When I spoke to N and K, they were ten days away from their fifth IVF transfer. After two miscarriages, they had decided to have their remaining embryos genetically tested. Of the twenty-eight eggs that the doctors had extracted from K in her last retrieval, only five had fertilized, and only one was viable. They found out the sex of the embryo and it was, for N, a “total mindfuck.” “Knowing the gender of this embryo in a freezer has made it seem more real to me, to us,” she says, and I suspect her conflation of sex and gender is deliberative. All her schooling had trained her to understand that having a gender is not what makes people real, but now, somehow, it did.

SOME DAYS AFTER I speak with N, she sends me a *New York Times* op-ed from April of this year titled “Adventures in Transgender Fertility,” by Joanne Spataro. The article details how Spataro’s fiancée, a trans woman named Lara, has been gradually decreasing her estrogen dosage so that she and Spataro can have a child “the way fertile cisgender people do: They simply couple up, and boom—a child is born.” Spataro’s writing evinces palpable discomfort around biological matters: she describes only the most superficial effects of estrogen withdrawal (weight gain, hair growth); she never uses the words “sperm” or “sex.” “If things worked out, I could have a biological child with the woman I love, as long as I had eggs and she had the other half of the ingredients,” Spataro writes. “And she did—sort of. But it hasn’t been straightforward.”

The indirectness of Spataro’s style surprised me at first, especially given the article’s broader aims of urging people in the trans community to speak more freely about fertility and to educate trans teenagers about preserving their fertility before transitioning. These social imperatives

seem at odds with Spataro's aching desire to create and inhabit a biological family. It is a desire she suppresses in her terminology—no sex, no sperm—but which she embraces in her imaginative descriptions of the child she and Lara might one day have. "The thought of not being able to have my own biological child could make me tear up in front of my happily childless friends," she writes. Of Lara, she observes: "She'd admit that all she wanted was to have a child together, a mixture of us two in human form, like two kinds of sand blended in a clear glass. A symbol of love who could walk around, crack jokes, do somersaults and go to college."

The vitriol of the online responses to Spataro's piece made me better understand why suppressing the sexual-biological dimension in her article might have been a strategic choice, betrayed by the *New York Times* in its promotional tweets that described Spataro and her partner as struggling to have a child the "old-fashioned way." "The sexual permutations have become overwhelming," complained Gary. "We're talking about a man and a woman having a baby, yes?" asked Charlie. "Trying to portray this as a lesbian experience is ridiculous and offensive," declared Iris, who, like Gary and Charlie, seemed upset and confused by the apparent normalness of it all: the egg and the sperm; the plain old sex; the singular and symbolic nature of the child born from (what they all presumed was) heterosexual coupling. Commentators from within the LGBT community were frustrated that Spataro and her partner's non-normative sex and gender roles did not align with an anti-normative practice of reproduction. That struck me as a terribly unfair burden to ask any person or couple to carry. Why did reproduction have to reify gender identity instead of making it gender-neutral? And why did reproducing as a lesbian and trans woman mean that Spataro and her partner had to model reproduction's most inconvenient configurations and its most subversive politics?

Perhaps the best account of the ambivalent relationship of reproductive desires to reproductive politics is micha cárdenas's bioart project *Pregnancy* (2009). *Pregnancy* pairs a poem describing cárdenas's experiences of cryogenic tissue banking with videos of her sperm wriggling under a microscope. To start producing sperm, cárdenas stopped taking her estrogen and T blockers; to examine her sperm, she purchased a kid's microscope kit for fifty dollars. "I felt like a trans woman scientist dating all these materials," she laughs when I ask about her DIY setup. "I was at a trans literature conference, and someone told me about a small Facebook group for trans women who were banking their sperm. I made the videos to post to the group and one of the members was a biologist who was really encouraging."

The Facebook group was, for cárdenas, just one node in a long history of trans women taking care of each other when no one else would. "They told me I would be sterile, / the doctors and brochures, / that I couldn't do this, / what I'm doing," cárdenas writes. "But they don't know / and they lied to me." The viciousness of the lie was compounded by the truth of the fatal violence that disproportionately affects trans women of color. This violence is itself a reproductive issue, one that often remains invisible to those who can take their safety for granted, whose reproductive timelines are organized around the slow inevitability of aging and not the possibility of sudden death. But cárdenas knows she may not live long enough to have children. "I could be dead anytime," she says. "There is a real sense of urgency."

cárdenas started writing *Pregnancy* when she went off her estrogen. Like S's, B's, and N and K's stories, *Pregnancy* deals in multiplicity and uncertainty, a record of extreme affects and imperfect politics. On the one hand, there is an expansiveness of life that cuts against the fear of death: "I see the sperm under the microscope, / each one swimming, with its own intention, / each one its own possible life, . . . / and I wonder / how many people are inside of me?"

At moments such as these, *Pregnancy* can seem Whitmanesque in its aesthetic and political aspirations. The individual act of reproduction emerges as a resounding, uncompromised act of political resistance, a way of making a world that was not made for you. “We will fight back these genocidal projects, by making life, family, love and joy, / by making babies with our queer trans bodies,” *cárdenas* writes. This is praxis in its most resplendent form: millions of sperm squirming, turning, chasing each other’s tails under the microscope’s attentive lens.

But just as soon as the poem begins to speak in the hortatory language of the manifesto, it retreats from its own optimistic prophecy, exhausted by the energy it takes to make and remake one’s body, let alone remake entire structures of oppression and injustice. The speaker’s voice turns flat, depressive, elegiacal. She starts to question the ethics of treating children as revolutionary projects. Instead of willing an alliance between reproductive desire and reproductive politics, *cárdenas* merely notes the unevenness of reproduction, how the right to have a child is not a right that is equally distributed:

but we decided . . . to go the biological route,
 because adoption seems almost impossible,
 for two sick brown queer and trans women,
 with histories of mental illness and poverty in both our families,
 you know, just the usual for QTPOC.
 The legal rights you have to your baby,
 are more tenuous if you don’t have a biological input,
 and I don’t want another trauma at an international border,
 and the cost of IUI, ICSI and IVF are in the tens of thousands,
 oh the privilege of
 cis-hetero reproduction!

What *Pregnancy* makes clear is that people's bodies are unruly sites for politics. They do not cling to universal or identitarian positions with the clarity or the righteousness that many desire. Nor should they. This is, in itself, a kind of anti-naturalist politics, a recognition that between the body and the political lies a vastly mediated world where belief and behavior do not always overlap. In this indeterminate space, people who appear similar in crude or categorical ways can have incommensurable experiences; and people who seem, on the face of it, very different from one another can have converging experiences of the physical and emotional impossibility of doing life's work under political conditions that are not meant for women—or families, however they are constructed—to thrive.

“WHY DOES ANYONE WANT to have children?” a friend of mine asked me after reading an early draft of this essay. It was a simple question but it startled me. I had not asked it to any of the women I had spoken to; it struck me as more intimate than asking them to describe their hormone injections and transvaginal ultrasounds. At the same time, it was a question that the injections and the ultrasounds made especially urgent: why would you put yourself through this?

It is not a question that has a rational answer. Like sexual desire, reproductive desire seems fundamentally irrational. The idea of a child is a fantasy, and like all fantasies, what it means varies from person to person. For me, a child could represent a path to immortality; for you, a chance at rectifying the sins of your father. Yet what is undeniable is that the fantasy becomes warped when its fulfillment is precluded not by individual bad luck, but by vast structural inequalities among women. The “unnaturalness” of your endeavor becomes a proxy for

your subjecthood, a referendum on your political, economic, or social position in an unequal and unjust world.

Yet all reproduction, even reproduction that appears “natural,” is assisted. Some forms of assistance are simply rendered invisible because they are taken for granted by people for whom reproduction is not an obviously political issue. If you do not have to pay money to conceive, it may not occur to you that conception can be prohibitively costly. If you do not have to transform your body to gestate, it may not occur to you that gestation is hard and risky work. If a physician has never hurt you or mocked you or ignored you or lied to you, it may not occur to you that being deemed healthy enough to have children is an ideology rather than an ontology. If you do not have to worry about the legal status of your relationship to your child, it may not occur to you that she can be taken away. If you do not fear for your safety, it may not occur to you that you need to stay alive to create life.

Where the stories above intersect is not primarily in the physical or psychological details of women’s encounters with reproductive technologies, but in how these technologies make visible our still-limited fantasies about reproductive politics. As Dorothy Roberts has argued, the mainstream movement for reproductive rights—the fantasy of perfectly unconstrained choice—has often crowded out the crusade by women of color for reproductive justice: not just a woman’s right not to have a child, but her right to have children and raise them with “dignity in safe, healthy, and supportive environments.” For Roberts, those rights are rarely acknowledged in debates over reproductive policy, which tends to focus on abortion at the exclusion of broader changes such as a non-discriminatory system of universal healthcare, paid parental leave, and protections for LGBT people and people with disabilities.

But acknowledging the positive right to reproduce may change more than just the distribution of public resources. It could make

assisted reproduction the preferred strategy by which we fight, until the natural no longer looms so large, no longer nestles comfortably into our language. It could begin to close the gap between women of different classes, races, and sexes, until stories such as the ones I have relayed here are no longer marked by anger, frustration, or loneliness but by solidarity. It could allow the political to catch up to the technological, our behavior to catch up to our beliefs, so that reproduction is no longer impossibly comprised—a haunted fantasy—for so many women.

Mothering

Sophie Lewis

THE GENDER OF GESTATING is ambiguous. I am not talking about pregnancy's deepening of one's voice, its carpeting of one's legs in bristly hair, or even about the ancient Greek belief that it was an analogue of men's duty to die in battle if called upon. I am not even thinking of the heterogeneity of those who gestate. Rather, in a context where political economists are talking constantly of "the feminization of labor," it seems to me that the economic gendering of the work itself—gestating *is* work, as Merve Emre says—is not as clear-cut as it would appear.

As Paul B. Preciado points out in *Testo Junkie* (2008), the feminization-of-labor thesis, which describes global trends toward job precarity—sorry, flexibility—and emotional labor is not very helpful. It presumes what femininity is; but even on its own terms, the waged baby-making workplaces of the twenty-first century do not fit well into that model. The commercial gestational surrogates who are doing pregnancy for pay in the comfort of their homes (in California) or in clinic-dormitories (in Nepal, Kenya, Laos) are working 24/7. They are not "flexible." They are supposed to be pure *techné*, uncreative muscle. Dreams of artificial

wombs may have been largely abandoned in the 1960s, but ever since the perfection of in vitro fertilization (IVF) enabled a body to gestate entirely foreign material, living humans have become the “technology” component of the euphemism “assisted reproductive technology.”

Angela Davis did not think the so-called New Reproductive Technologies were all that new, anyway: hadn't black women long served as surrogates on the Americas' plantations? Since motherhood in the United States was elaborated as an institution of married white womanhood, black enslaved women could make no claim of kinship or property to the fruits of their gestational labors. Indeed, they were not even publicly recognized as *women*, let alone mothers or Americans. Other eugenic and patriarchal laws dispossessed unwed proletarians of “their” babies, as well. To this day, the racial and class dynamics of U.S. society continue to trouble the commonplace certainty (*mater semper certa est*) that gestation naturally produces the status of motherhood for the gestator.

But this also raises the question of whether it *should*: whether motherhood and pregnancy are viable cornerstones of a livable world. Humans still die in the hundreds of thousands every year because of pregnancy, making a mockery of UN millennium goals to stop the carnage. Almost a thousand of us die yearly doing childbirth in the United States alone, and another 65,000 “nearly die.” This situation is social, not simply natural. Feminists used to draw a distinction between mothering (potentially good) and motherhood (bad). The former conjured an ensemble of practices (including Audre Lorde’s “we can learn to mother ourselves”) that could potentially destroy the latter institution. With today’s abandonment of family-critical horizons, however, mainstream feminists have largely left this helpful distinction in the dust.

Fortunately, while the infertility industry continues to throw every last resource into convincing everyone that they must have a

biogenetic babe of their own, radicals such as Alexis Pauline Gumbs are salvaging an earlier tradition of thinking creatively about the work of mothering. In her writing, Gumbs points to traditions of polymaternalism (where each child has many mothers, of whatever gender) as evidence of the queerness and communistic anti-propertarianism of some longstanding black kinship practices. It was the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers that proclaimed that children “will not belong to the patriarchy. They will not belong to us either. They will belong only to themselves.” Doing away with parental possessiveness, fostering a comradely relation between adults and children instead: this was the point of Marge Piercy’s vision of a society, in *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), reliant on automated gestation. It is the oft-forgotten crux of Shulamith Firestone’s proposal, too, alongside her insistence on vindicating those who, as Emre puts it, “simply did not want to do the work of gestation.”

So I imagine it must have been with some reluctance that Emre, in composing this piece, turned from the history of procreative automation in speculative fiction, 1970s utopian feminism, and science experiments (that 1894 steamer trunk!) to begin her luminous yet despondent tour of “infertility treatment” as it actually exists in the United States. I could not agree more with Emre’s argument that all procreation should be regarded as assisted; in my opinion, this ought to be leftist doxa. “We are utterly at stake to one another”: that’s a recent phrase of Donna Haraway’s, but I still remember when it first clicked for me. I had casually dropped the term “assisted reproduction” into a conversation. My interlocutor was a disability rights activist. I had thought to impress her; instead, a sharp disquieting laugh pulled me up short in the middle of introducing myself. “As though baby-making could be *unassisted!*” she said. Too true. It takes lots of work from lots of people to make and remake us, before and after we are born.

In her essay, Emre keeps one toe firmly planted in the question of work and liberation from work. “Fertility treatments felt like another full-time job,” she writes of K. Even the precise temporal discipline (so painstakingly described by Marx) of assisted reproduction is weirdly similar. What helps workers survive, as ever, is care, community, and solidarity—forces, Emre found, that were coming overwhelmingly from women. Indeed, excepting the extras who appear momentarily in order to be homophobic or flail in the face of a retroverted cervix, there are not any men in Emre’s essay. There are only women and eggs and sperm. Realizing this, I initially thought, “Firestone would be proud!” However, as Emre makes clear, you do not actually need men or even heterosexuality these days to uphold a pretty conservative image of the family.

There were two minor stumbles in the course of Emre’s discussion. The first was her (sympathetic) reflection that Joanne Spataro “evinces palpable discomfort around biological matters.” I did not feel that Spataro “describes only the most superficial effects of estrogen withdrawal.” What was missing? Perhaps the risk of suicidality; details of breast and genital size fluctuation. Emre also writes that some terminology (specifically “sex” and “sperm”) was “suppressed.” But, relative to the level of explicit detail one expects in narratives about cisgender parents, there is no dearth of biology in “Adventures in Transgender Fertility.” Admittedly, this *is* the one scenario in Emre’s story in which a penis is doing the inseminating. Should this mean, though, that it is the one place where “sexual” and “biological” appear as synonyms?

Speaking as a stakeholder, also boasting a trans fiancée: the mechanical and psychological dynamics of the rare subtype of lesbian sex that involves vaginal penetration by bio-cock do interest me. I still feel they are legitimately (not just strategically) excluded from a discussion about the specificity of the procreative timing question for trans people.

The *New York Times*' promotional use of the phrase "the old-fashioned way" at least mirrors, if not reflects, the prurient wish on the part of a tacitly transphobic public that Spataro "justify" Lara's possession of a penis capable of ejaculating in the vicinity of her cervix. Emre so rightly perceives, in the varied types of harsh response to the piece online, an unfair demand from LGBTQ readers that this couple should "model reproduction's most inconvenient configurations or its most radical politics." But perhaps the expectation, however sympathetically couched, that the trans woman's sex and sperm be held up *comfortably* is equally a little unfair.

The second hesitation I experienced concerned the reference to "political conditions that are not meant for women—or families, however they are constructed—to thrive." On the one hand, this is a vital puncturing of the lie of "family values." As Nina Power has it, "Politics is so pro-child in theory because it is so anti-child (and anti-woman) in practice." Capitalist society is entirely uninterested in the thriving of anyone or anything, except surplus value. It is only designed "for families" in the sense that inheritance laws have been instrumental in the production of inequality. On the other hand, that is why I appreciate the inclusivity of Emre's tacit definition of family, angled to encompass the relationships once known as *kith*: the elective kinships and caring commitments that have historically kept dispossessed queer youth (and other outcasts from productivity) alive.

The Violence of the Natural

Annie Menzel

MERVE EMRE OFFERS a sweeping account of over a century of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs), from a Progressive Era “artificial womb” to the unevenly distributed dramas and devastations of in vitro fertilization (IVF) today. The near-complete absence of race and racism from the essay, however, obscures both the context and the core of the case that Emre is trying to make.

This is a shame, because there is much here to admire. Particularly potent and timely is Emre’s appreciation of Shulamith Firestone’s 1970 call in *The Dialectic of Sex* for mechanized gestation as fundamental to the abolition of gender hierarchy. Firestone’s vision stands as a metric of current failures, highlighting the entrenchment of heteropatriarchy, cis-normativity, and class stratification in current uses of ARTs, even as these technologies approach and exceed our forebears’ science-fictional imaginings.

Emre excoriates Firestone’s second-wave critics for their recourse to “the natural” as the sacred ground of feminist resistance, particularly vis-à-vis medicalized birth. She rightly notes, moreover, the cresting

dominance of “the natural” as a heteronormative and classist brand. This critique grounds her persuasive call for an “anti-naturalist” politics: an avowal of the fact that, whether or not it involves test tubes, “all reproduction is assisted”: that is, embedded in contexts and relationships that foster life—or fail to.

But the violence of “the natural” long preceded its second-wave champions. As Hazel Carby and Hortense Spillers argued in their work in the 1980s, the enslavement of African and African-descended people entailed their expulsion from heteropatriarchal gender and kinship categories. White families defined themselves by these hierarchical roles, children serving as intergenerational conduits for the spoils of conquest and chattel slavery. But for humans rendered commodities, the “natural” relations of “mother” and “father” entailed no rights or protections with respect to their saleable offspring. This legacy persists in prevailing stereotypes of “unnatural” black (un)mothers and (un)fathers. Among other things, this justifies, as Dorothy Roberts demonstrates, the mass removal of black children from their homes and, often, placement with white families. Similar logics long underpinned the mass removal of Native American children from their kin. Or all too recently, we might look to the murder-suicide that killed Devonte Hart and his five siblings, all black. Their adoptive mothers’ white middle-class “naturalness” covered over years of torture preceding the fatal act.

Racism has also deeply shaped the occurrence of prematurity, miscarriage, and infertility. Emre’s “artificial womb” surfaced in the context of massive baby-saving campaigns that ignored black infants, despite the fact that black infants died at roughly double the rate as did white infants. Harmonizing with the above black feminist theorizations, an emerging public health consensus sees the vast disparities in reproductive health in the United States as rooted in the intergenerational violence of racism. Anthropologist Dana-Ain Davis hence casts disparate black

prematurity rates as manifesting what Saidiya Hartman terms “the afterlife of slavery”: the everyday anti-blackness, state violence, and medical racism that yields the same black–white infant mortality ratio today as in the 1890s. Infertility and, as Omese’eke Natasha Tinsley observes, reproductive losses across the board also all disproportionately impact black women, yet the still-potent myth of black hyperfecundity overshadows this fact.

Moreover, to adequately attend to racism demands acknowledging that, while “natural” birth should not be fetishized, overmedicalization presents real harms. Emre’s dismissal of 1970s feminist calls for demedicalized birth obscures these harms (and in fact sits oddly with B’s and N’s suffering at the hands of residents), which are vastly disproportionate for people of color. As the Black Women Birthing Justice Collective highlights, black women are far more likely than whites to be injured or die from the sequelae of cesarean delivery.

No surprise, then, that racism permeates the world of ARTs. Daisy Deomampo has shown in her work on Indian surrogacy that these circuits of reproductive labor underwrite the global reproduction of whiteness. And even as fertility care candidates in North America may hail from a broader racial and gender spectrum, racism permeates the lives that follow IVF. In “Confessions of a Black Pregnant Dad,” Syrus Marcus Ware writes, “As a trans dad, my gender identity is challenged in several ways,” by that none of those affect “our family as much as the way that race-based thinking is projected on the tiniest of humans.”

Emre’s framing obscures the violence of racism as central to reproductive injustice. Because of this, it also misses the manifold ways that women of color and queer people of color have conceived of and practiced anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and gender-liberatory modes of reproduction and kinship. Particularly powerful and generative is the Reproductive Justice framework for theory, praxis, and movement

building. Rooted in black and woman-of-color feminism, Reproductive Justice, as defined by the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, centers the human rights to have a child, not to have a child, to parent children in healthy and safe environments, gender freedom, and sexual autonomy. It refuses neoliberal logics of “choice,” puts those most impacted by reproductive oppression at the center of analysis and organizing, and sees children as a collective responsibility. As one of SisterSong’s founding organizers and theorists Loretta Ross writes, “children are the links to our ancestors, and responsibility for their health, education, safety, and well-being rests with the community.”

On this point, Emre in fact truncates Firestone’s own vision. Firestone coupled her technological imperative with a call for “the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role to society as a whole.” Alexis Pauline Gumbs reminds us that this too is a vision that women of color, particularly queer women, have made most manifest. Drawing on the account of “Doc,” a participant in the 1979 First National Conference of Third World Lesbians and Gays, she writes that the Third World Lesbian Caucus “claimed responsibility for the children of all individual lesbians of color as a collective of third world lesbians.” This contributed to “the project of seeing mothering as a queer collaboration with the future . . . transforming the parenting relationship from a property relationship to a partnership in practice.”

None of this is to minimize the heartbreak of S, B, N, K, or micha cárdenas in their respective quests for biological parenthood. Emre importantly calls attention to the dangers that face cárdenas as a Latina trans woman—though tellingly, she is the only person whose ethnicity Emre mentions. Without reckoning with the historical relations between racism and reproduction, however, we can fully understand neither the breadth nor the source of that danger. With respect to all of the stories that these aspiring parents courageously share, we are far less able to

apprehend the interweaving of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism that issues in crushing isolation and reproductive scarcity. Conversely, centering black and woman-of-color feminist conceptions and practices of kinship offers abundant technologies for living into the assistance that all of our futures require.

Neoliberal Perfectionism

Chris Kaposy

ALTHOUGH MERVE EMRE does not use the term “neoliberal” in her essay, she vividly brings to life the effects of neoliberalism on our reproductive choices. When I speak of neoliberalism, I mean the “small-government” ideology of deregulation, laissez-faire economics, low taxation, elimination of social programs, socioeconomic inequality, the privatization of public resources, and a lack of collective social organization directed by government. Among the worst way that neoliberalism can affect our reproductive choices is by ingratiating its political and economic imperatives into the reproductive options that are available to us, in the process subverting our most considered values.

One of the most obvious ways that neoliberal politics can influence reproductive choices is by denying parents paid leave when they have children, and job security when they return to work. In the United States, unlike in other affluent nations, paid parental leave is privatized—a benefit available only to those who work for employers willing to provide it. Without parental leave and job protection, workers might be motivated to put off having children until they are established in their

career, or until they have saved enough money to take time off to raise a child through the first months or years of life.

The Silicon Valley version of social justice, exemplified by Emre's story of S, enables this deferral of parenthood by technologizing reproduction: ovarian stimulation, egg retrieval, egg freezing, preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), and in vitro fertilization (IVF). Assisted reproduction interventions and employer-provided coverage for egg freezing and parental leave can transform getting pregnant and giving birth into a set of consumer transactions with reproductive health technicians and HR wonks.

Emre focuses on the stories of women utilizing and contracting for assisted reproduction, and does not discuss the more disadvantaged contributors to assisted reproduction. The whole enterprise of technologized reproduction feeds off of inequality created by neoliberal politics. For example, egg donors are usually young women who are paid to undergo ovarian stimulation and egg harvesting so that their eggs can be used by others in IVF interventions when they experience infertility. The donors tend to have financial needs sufficient to motivate them to undergo these unpleasant and dangerous procedures. In other words, a sufficient level of economic inequality is necessary for the existence of a market for donating ova. Feminist bioethics scholars such as Françoise Baylis have warned against the exploitation of egg donors for assisted reproduction. The risks posed to these women are often ignored in debates about the ethics of IVF. Because of the health risks, underpayment for egg donors is a problem, due to worries about exploiting the desperation of poor women. But overpayment would also be a problem because of concerns about undue inducement.

Economic inequality is also necessary for the participation of pregnancy surrogates, who are involved in some assisted reproduction arrangements. One U.S. surrogacy agency advertises reimbursement fees

for surrogates in the range of \$35,000 to \$40,000 (alongside other fees for undergoing embryo transfer and for costs such as maternity clothing). The costs ultimately paid by intended parents are much higher, due to agency fees, legal fees, and other costs. Aspiring parents from Western countries looking for lower-cost surrogacy have created a commercial surrogacy industry in places such as India and Thailand. In such countries, there is a clear likelihood of exploiting the precarious economic circumstances of women for whom surrogacy fees might seem appealing.

At a deeper level, the technologization of reproduction encourages a norm of ableist perfectionism that is consistent with the neoliberal worldview. For example, intended parents often seek out egg donors who exemplify certain cultural ideals of perfection. Agencies place ads seeking donors who are Ivy League students. Potential donors with desirable traits that are thought to be heritable—intelligence, athleticism, musical talent—are promised a premium payout, sometimes in the range of \$100,000. The message conveyed by such practices is that intended parents want their children to join the elite—to be high achievers according to the conventional standards that are set by our current economic system. Within this system, being a student at Harvard or Yale is at the top of a hierarchy, showing a high degree of promise for economic success. The hope is that the child resulting from elite gametes can replicate this success.

Ableism is a concern even when using one's own gametes, though. Emre tells the story of N and K, a couple who have their embryos genetically tested prior to implantation, though they are distressed by the ableism inherent in genetic testing. Such genetic testing is widespread now even in non-ART pregnancies, and most prospective parents choose to terminate when told that the test indicates a high likelihood of, for example, Down syndrome. I have argued in my book *Choosing Down Syndrome* that one prominent motive

for seeking to identify and eliminate fetuses with Down syndrome is the belief that children with Down syndrome will have reduced economic opportunity as compared to children without disabilities. Other reasons for prenatal testing and selective termination do not add up. People living with Down syndrome enjoy their lives and their families tend to be as stable and functional as other families. Nonetheless, people with Down syndrome may have difficulty fitting in to the job market without certain forms of public support. The perfectionism we impose on our children arises, in my opinion, from a deep-seated need to have children that replicate the conventional set of values in which we live our lives, and our economic system exerts a profound influence on these values.

Now in Emre's article, N and K do not undertake genetic testing of their embryos for these economic reasons. They undergo testing because it provides information about which embryos have the best chance of a live birth. For this reason, no one undergoing IVF can be faulted for having their embryos genetically tested. But notice how the logic of assisted reproduction is stacked against giving birth to a child with a disability. Once a test like PGD exists to enable one to avoid the birth of a child with a condition such as Down syndrome, it becomes imperative to do so. IVF as a technology of control over reproduction requires control of even the genome of the child.

The fact that a disabling condition reduces the chances of live birth is a very sensible justification for genetic testing, yet the very sensibility of this justification contributes to the veneer of necessity. When people get pregnant without ARTs, and refuse prenatal testing, they welcome the chance that the child will have a genetically-caused disability, and take on the possibility of miscarriage. Such choices are totally contrary to the intended outcomes of pregnancy technologized through IVF, and are thus unlikely to even be contemplated.

The view that assisted reproduction contributes to feminist goals tout court requires a facile understanding of feminism that does not take into account the intersectionality of gender with race, class, sexuality, disability, and other targets of oppression. Emre's article is striking because she shows the potential suffering that awaits anybody who seeks assisted reproduction.

Be Wary of the Techno-fix

Marcy Darnovsky

IN HER ESSAY, Merve Emre declares that “all reproduction . . . is assisted.” Few feminists of any wave or stripe would disagree. But if the statement that none of us go it alone is solid, some of Emre’s other moves put her on shaky ground. In her opening volleys, she skips lightly across fifty years of feminist thinking about reproductive technologies, leaping from Shulamith Firestone to Adrienne Rich to xenofeminism, with a brief stop at Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1984). She arrives at a diagnosis of contemporary reproductive culture: it is infected, she says, by “the discourse of the natural.” She takes contemporary feminism to task for this state of affairs, suggesting that it has not been sufficiently enthusiastic about high-tech reproduction and asserting that it “has not done a good enough job articulating what alternate strategies of reproduction may be.”

Is that really a fair critique of feminism today? Most feminists have long been aware that simplistic appeals to nature can justify anything, including gender inequalities and oppression. And while questions about “nature” and “technology” are very far from settled, little recent

feminist theory or practice turns on naïve notions of “the natural.” In the twenty-first century, marketers of breakfast cereals, cosmetics, and prenatal vitamins—not feminists—are the main purveyors of the naturalistic fallacy.

The bulk of Emre’s essay is occupied with presenting four vignettes, recounted with sympathy and in some detail, about people whose efforts to form families involve various technological procedures. Most of them experience discrimination in their reproductive pursuits, and none of the technologies work very well. With her focus on stories, Emre seems to acknowledge that the vexing questions raised by technologically assisted reproduction cannot be resolved by theory alone. I agree.

Unfortunately, her commitment to the emancipatory power of reproductive technologies is untroubled by her own accounts of unsatisfactory endings. Despite multiple examples of reproductive technologies that deliver not babies but disappointment (and in some cases, physical and emotional harms), Emre is strangely incurious about what might be amiss. She does not say so, but perhaps she assumes that one day soon, when the technologies improve, they will set us free. In her conclusion, she appropriately mentions the need to address the “vast structural inequalities among women.” But the main lesson she appears to draw is that liberation lies in disdain for “the natural” and deference to the technological.

Let’s take a quick look at Emre’s treatment of egg retrieval, on which her first two stories center. Women undergo this invasive and often arduous procedure whether they are trying to get pregnant immediately, selling their eggs to someone else, or—increasingly over the past several years—freezing their own eggs for possible later use. Emre’s informant B, who plans to use her eggs to produce her own baby, experiences ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome, the symptoms of which include debilitating pain and a heartbeat “so fast . . . that she

worried she might have a heart attack.” Emre tells us all this, but does not ask how often this syndrome occurs, how dangerous it is, or what it means for weighing the risks and benefits of egg retrieval in various circumstances.

In her profile of S, who works for a biotech company that covers the costs of egg freezing for its employees, Emre briefly mentions feminist critiques of this practice. But she does so only in a short strung-together list of objections: “its classist and anti-feminist politics, its shoddy scientific underpinnings, and its *antagonism to a natural timeline of motherhood*” (emphasis added). Since we already know about Emre’s hostility to “the natural” in relation to motherhood, and since she says nothing further about the other concerns, the implication is that none are valid. When she reports S’s belief that her fifteen frozen eggs are “a happy product of Silicon Valley’s marriage of capitalist competition and social justice,” she makes no comment. And when she writes that S calls the eggs her “insurance policy,” she does not note that this is the marketing language of the multibillion-dollar fertility industry, which is understandably delighted that egg freezing has opened up a large new customer base of women who have no particular problem with infertility.

Emre is on target in criticizing unequal access to reproductive technologies, whether the disparities are due to out-of-pocket expense or to discrimination against people from queer communities. But access and affordability are far from the only problems. Notwithstanding her stories’ less-than-happy endings, she manages to avoid an entire thicket of thorny issues about safety, effectiveness, and ethics. These include grossly understudied and under-acknowledged health risks of egg retrieval, even after hundreds of thousands of women have endured it over the past forty years; often stark power imbalances in assisted reproduction arrangements that involve third-party egg providers and gestators, especially when borders are crossed; widespread misunderstanding,

cultivated by rose-tinted marketing, of just how often in vitro fertilization (IVF) fails; and commercial dynamics in the lucrative fertility industry that add to assisted reproduction's risks and costs.

Emre's enthusiasm for high-tech reproduction seems connected less to the evidence she presents than to animus for her straw-feminist politics of "the natural." Despite her theoretical references, she bypasses basic insights about the politics of science and technology that are now widespread in feminist and social theory, and implicit in much progressive practice: that "nature" and "technology" are inextricably entangled with each other; and that they reflect and are shaped by power relations, social structures, and political dynamics.

For the people whose lives are touched by or created with the help of assisted reproduction, a lot rests on getting this right. And for all of us, the stakes are about to get much higher. We are currently in the midst of a heated global controversy about the prospect of coupling assisted reproduction with emerging gene editing tools, such as CRISPR, to control the genes and traits passed on to future children and generations. If reproductive gene editing were to move into use, IVF would serve as its technological, commercial, and ideological platform.

Advocates of reproductive gene editing typically justify it as a way for those at risk of transmitting inherited disease to have children who are unaffected and also genetically related to both members of a heterosexual couple. But this argument is tenuous at best, since an embryo screening procedure that has been available for decades provides an alternate and safer means to the same ends. Meanwhile, the likely societal consequences of reproductive gene editing are dire. If allowed for any reason, it would almost certainly be adopted in the service of "human enhancement." It is all too easy to envision fertility clinics advertising genetic upgrades to upscale clients, and genetically modified children being treated as superior—whether or not their biological

alterations made any physiological difference. Not far off from there, a dystopian world like the one in the science fiction film *Gattaca* (1997) could take hold: a society of genetic “haves” and “have-nots” in which new forms of discrimination and inequality are layered on top of the already existing ones.

For these and related reasons, reproductive gene editing is currently prohibited by some forty countries and a binding Council of Europe treaty. But advocates for permitting it have become increasingly active since the development of CRISPR. Some think its use can be restricted to a few circumstances; some uncritically embrace full-out efforts to create genetically enhanced humans. Concerns about social consequences are often smeared by invoking arguments similar to Emre’s call to reject “the natural.”

Both the pitfalls of assisted reproduction as currently practiced and the perils ahead counsel caution in the face of powerful new reproductive technologies, especially those developed in the context of profit incentives. It seems clear that we need to be every bit as wary of the techno-fix as of naïve appeals to nature. Any biopolitics—and any emancipatory feminism—adequate to our time surely needs to start there.

Suspending (Feminist) Judgment

Irina Aristarkhova

MERVE EMRE'S PROJECT aims to center "particular peoples' experiences of reproduction and care" in feminist advocacy, hoping in so doing that this will bring us closer to addressing the "vast structural inequalities of time, money, kinship, healthcare, legal protections, and bodily integrity." Sign me up! However, later in her essay Emre complicates her own vision when she notes that "people's bodies are unruly sites for politics." And that is the trouble: the devil is always in the details.

Emre's text makes beautifully clear that *the personal will always trump the political*. When facing "real" people with their "real" feelings, Emre wants us to suspend any (feminist or other) judgment. Because the private, like the body, is an unruly site for politics: as Emre's subject B says, "for the possibility of this other kind of love, I will apparently do everything." Indeed, when our own deep, uncontrollable, personal desires are concerned, we rarely act in line with whatever political choices we think should be made. Life is more complicated. You can call it hypocrisy, but Emre presents a more sympathetic picture that appeals to me because it opens itself to vulnerability, even as it risks

complicating her project of inclusive feminism. I will extend in two directions what Emre started here.

First, Emre's four stories point toward new questions about public and medical policy related to assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). The subject S is working for a company in Silicon Valley that, as a part of her healthcare package, covers a limited opportunity to harvest eggs for freezing. S, who is thirty-four, sees this "treatment" as "insurance" for future fertility options. The next subject, B, is a forty-year-old writer and university lecturer going through various ART treatments and enduring setbacks. She is disadvantaged as a single woman between jobs, including the realization that her new employer has a one-year waiting period before paid maternity leave is available. Her "older" reproductive age means constant agonizing over her current options.

B's situation is what S wants to avoid. If B had frozen viable embryos, eggs, or in vitro gametes (a new ART on the horizon which was recently successfully tested on animals), she would not need to worry about her age to have "her own" genetically-related children. The age of conception and gestation has been pushed well out by ARTs, and the debate is currently raging among feminists and bioethicists—not to mention the public—of whether women should have an age limit to fertility treatments at all. Some argue, why restrict women to some arbitrary premenopausal age? What if a woman is born without a uterus, and therefore never had a chance of being premenopausal? Along the lines of Shulamith Firestone, the Australian expert on trans medicine, William A. W. Walters, advocated for ectogenesis (artificial wombs) and uterine transplantation (when that becomes possible) "for the infertile woman who might otherwise have to consider surrogacy."

Arguments for age limits on ARTs usually are framed in bioethical literature around ideas of the "nature" of the human life cycle. Robert Sparrow, a philosopher who focuses on the ethics of technology, argues

that because the inability to conceive a child after menopause cannot constitute infertility, “It therefore might be argued that reproductive freedom does not extend to the right of a woman to become pregnant after having undergone normal menopause.”

This moves toward my second point, which is about rights of access. When Emre writes that for S, the option to harvest and freeze her reproductive tissue is “a happy product of Silicon Valley’s marriage of capitalist competition and social justice,” the phrase is both problematic and provocative. Using the language of social justice to talk about access to the latest ARTs risks alienating those potential allies who are fighting for the basic “right to choose” or access to free quality prenatal and childcare.

In the stories Emre presents, different kinds of people’s varying degrees of access to ARTs are also flattened out. B’s conundrum is very different from S’s, but their various struggles seem to be homogenized under the larger theoretical umbrella of the “right to have a child,” with an addition of empathetic rhetoric that is rightfully ecumenical in the moment but leaves me somehow wanting.

I am reminded of a 1999 art project *Does She or Doesn't She? (Cheaper by the Dozen)*, created by the cyberfeminist art collective subRosa. Presented on the Carnegie Mellon University campus, the project brought attention to the fact that many ovarian egg “donations” are made by college students in order to pay for their college education—not as personal “insurance,” like it is for S. And students get paid more money if they are blonde, blue-eyed, and white, because enough ART customers will pay more for their eggs.

In a part of her bioart project *Pregnancy* that is not quoted by Emre, micha cárdenas raises these issues of privilege, her own specifically, describing herself as “a light-skinned Latina whose immigrant father made sure she made it through college.” She continues, “In California, I had access to a trans-woman endocrinologist and a trans-woman surgeon,”

unlike many trans women of color, who struggle to “live long enough to realize their dreams” because of anti-trans violence.

South African photographer Zanele Muholi’s work also testifies to cárdenas’s point in beautiful large-scale portraits of Muholi’s queer, lesbian, and trans friends. Their faces speak to differences that the kind of feminist solidarity Emre champions must attend to.

Emre’s essay engages with an important and increasingly topical question of how to respond, from our specific subject positions and cross-disciplinary vantage points, to assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). In feminist scholarship, it is well-traveled territory, exemplified by Susan Merrill Squier’s *Babies in Bottles: Twentieth-Century Visions of Reproductive Technologies* (1994), among many others. More current updates are always welcome, though, especially ones that use personal narratives as tethers to lived experience.

Feminist Paradoxes

Diane Tober

MERVE EMRE REJECTS the concept of “the natural” in the realm of human reproduction. She also challenges the reader to look beyond gendered binaries to think about the human experience of reproduction in an expanded way—one that includes single individuals, same-sex couples, and trans and gender-nonconforming people—for a maximally inclusive feminist solidarity.

I appreciate this undertaking even if Emre’s rejection of the “natural” is not new. Feminist anthropologists, such as Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier, have long critiqued ideas of “natural sex,” gender binaries, and “natural” male and female procreative roles. It seems to me though that Emre’s dictum, “all reproduction . . . is assisted,” may unnecessarily limit what can be meant by a term as capacious as “natural.” One could contend, for example, that it is *natural* for a lesbian couple or single woman without a partner to conceive with the help of a donor sperm. As one woman I interviewed told me: “Of course we used a sperm donor. How else would a lesbian get pregnant?” It is likewise *natural* for a person who faces difficulties conceiving to

pursue whatever technology is available to help with having a child. It is *natural* for a trans woman to both want the body that matches her gender identity and to go off hormones to create a child with her own gametes, whether on her own or with her partner. There is perhaps nothing more *natural* for anyone who wants to reproduce than to avail themselves of every possible advantage in order to do so. This is why so many fertility patients stumble down the rabbit hole of ever-increasing technological interventions.

Reframing the *natural* may be a start. But the anthropologist in me is not satisfied with this approach, as “natural” still feels essentializing. To achieve a maximally inclusive feminist solidarity, rather than limiting our perspective to expanded views of “assisted” or “natural,” we may be better served by casting off both. The assisted/natural dichotomy will always be stuck in outmoded notions of binary oppositions. A feminist future must move forward without these limitations.

Questions more germane to envisioning a feminist future include: *How do uses of reproductive technologies (RTs) reinforce or upend societal standards and stigmas? How do RTs lead to new formulations of family? How does our vision of reproductive justice for all families account for the welfare of third-party providers of eggs or wombs, who expose themselves to medical risk out of financial need and wind up alienated from the children produced through their reproductive labor?*

In my new book, *Romancing the Sperm: Shifting Biopolitics and the Making of Modern Families*, I explore how reproductive technologies originally intended for use by married heterosexual couples have revolutionized the meaning of family and the means by which family is created. When I first started researching in the 1990s, I was interested in how single women and lesbian couples accessed donor sperm and fertility treatment, at a time when unmarried women were often denied access to care. Many people I interviewed perceived their decisions to

conceive a child with a sperm donor—whether on their own or with a female partner—as fulfilling a “natural” desire that also just happened to be politically and socially subversive.

The process of selecting genetic material for one’s future child takes account of ethnicity, race, nationality, and a host of other factors that we would in most other instances find to be uncomfortable. Individuals have their own beliefs about genetics and social value that influence how they choose a donor—a set of biases I refer to as “grassroots eugenics.” For example, one lesbian couple I interviewed decided against a sperm donor with German ancestry because they did not want to have a child whose ancestors could have any ties to Nazi Germany. They ultimately chose a medical student who drank coffee and played basketball, because he seemed like someone they could relate to. These choices were idiosyncratic, rooted in private values about what kind of people, community, and world they wanted to create and live in. At its most virtuous, grassroots eugenics can be thought of as individual reproductive rebellion against racist, sexist, and classist patriarchal models—particularly among people whose families are created outside heteronormative configurations. In this context, donor selection is a kind of embodied micro-politics that confronts the biopolitical order, but not without controversy.

Much has changed in the realm of technological reproduction and family formation since I first embarked on this work. While emerging technologies offer new options, as Emre notes, few offer unambiguous improvements in the lives of women. For example, egg freezing is often presented to healthy young women as offering the freedom to pursue a career and reproduce on one’s own timeline. However, as a *company-provided* benefit, it is not evident that women are the chief beneficiaries of these services. Indeed, such benefits could be construed as coercion to prioritize the needs of the company over a woman’s desire to have a

child. New technologies create new possibilities, but they also present us with these kinds of feminist paradoxes.

New freedoms created for some also often come at the expense of new or worsening oppression for others. While sperm donors do not expose themselves to medical risk, egg donors and gestational surrogates do. In my most recent research with egg donors, for example, some reported serious complications as a direct result of providing eggs. Some former egg donors also later face their own infertility, and due to cost are rarely able to benefit from the services they earlier sold to others. Gamete donors and surrogates may also have complicated feelings about the children they helped create. Some may feel regret years after their donations because they long to meet the children born from their eggs or sperm and cannot. Third-party providers can feel like they are treated as products in the reproductive enterprise. Their voices need to be heard—and their humanity seen—in order to better understand the consequences when some bodies are conscripted to the service of others.

I appreciate Emre's call for an inclusive feminist future that embraces the family-building needs of all people, but I am troubled by the silent voices of paid third-party reproductive providers who help bring some of those families to life. To achieve an inclusive feminist future, and reproductive justice for all, we need to consider how to balance the rights of all people to create and maintain their families—regardless of gender, race, class, or sexual orientation—with the health and human rights of women who provide eggs and wombs to help others or out of financial need.

Selling Hope

Miriam Zoll

ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES (ARTs) are multidimensional and complicated, as are the human rights and ethical debates surrounding access to them. I commend Merve Emre for providing readers with a glimpse of what it is like to be subject to this surreal realm of medicine. As Emre notes, feminists—as well as women’s health and human rights organizations—have fiercely critiqued ARTs since the 1970s. While early groups such as the Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering (FINRRAGE) faded away, new ones have sprung up in their place, including the Center for Genetics and Society, Stop Surrogacy Now, and We Are Egg Donors.

Despite this resistance, clinics around the world today actively market and sell ART services to the reproductively challenged—even though many ART services have not been proven safe or effective, and often end in failure.

In vitro fertilization (IVF) was initially developed to help women with blocked fallopian tubes to conceive, but over the decades clinics

offered it and other ART procedures more and more widely—regardless of the limited evidence of their effectiveness. For example, research from Spain in 2015 found that, despite the industry-wide practice of recommending elective embryo freezing, there was no proof that the costly service increased most couples' chances of birthing a baby.

Around the same time, a sizeable study by Emory School of Medicine found that the use of intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI)—where sperm is injected directly into the egg—has more than doubled in the last two decades. ICSI was initially developed to treat certain male infertility conditions, such as sperm defects. But the 2015 investigation found that ICSI was regularly being employed whether the male was infertile or not, and that the expensive service did not improve live birth rates in cases where there was no male infertility.

The marketing tactics the industry uses to recruit healthy young women to freeze or sell their eggs, or to “rent” their uteruses for surrogacy, has galvanized many feminists and bioethicists to educate the public about how the egg freezing and surrogacy industries exploit poor women's reproductive labor while also benefitting from the monetization of wealthier women's hopes. The reach of this campaign has been limited though when compared to that of clinics, which actively downplay the safety, efficacy, and ethical implications of the services their patients are purchasing. Unfortunately, in the absence of such knowledge, doctors are in effect experimenting on patients and invoicing them for access to expensive, unproven procedures that can often cause more harm than good.

As with cosmetic surgery, the consumer is typically paying cash, and therefore not reliant on insurance approval or a doctor's referral. Because of this, non-medically indicated ART is a murky world of relatively lax oversight. As I argue in my book *Cracked*

Open: Liberty, Fertility and the Pursuit of High-Tech Babies (2013), which is based on my own experience with ART, anyone who wishes to use ART services should have the right to be informed about the full spectrum of potential help and harm—including emotional trauma—that procedures may cause, either to themselves or their potential offspring. Emre's ethnographic examples show that this kind of informed consent is not the industry standard, and illustrates the need for better regulation. In the following section, I highlight some of the distressing facts about these technologies that many clinics rarely share with their customers.

EMRE INTRODUCES US to S, a thirty-four-year-old single woman who yearns for biological motherhood and decides to freeze her eggs. In 2012 the American Society for Reproductive Medicine lifted the so-called “experimental” label from oocyte cryopreservation. Until then, egg freezing had only been recommended for women with serious illnesses who were about to undergo treatments that could damage their fertility. Almost immediately hundreds of clinics began aggressively marketing the procedure to *healthy* young women such as S, claiming that it was a reproductive revolution on par with the pill.

Caught up in a wave of fear about her fertility and new cultural pressures to do *something* to protect her chance of biological motherhood, S optimistically climbs on board, assuming that egg freezing is a silver bullet. Yet in the United Kingdom, public records show that in 2016, only 19 percent of thaw treatment cycles resulted in live birth. Moreover, the dearth of longitudinal women's health studies after exposure to potent hormones raises alarms, as does

the absence of studies focusing on the effect that freezing eggs in liquid nitrogen might have on infant health. The absence of data is not proof of safety.

Another of Emre's subjects, B, a forty-year-old single professor, undergoes an intrauterine insemination that ends in a miscarriage. Grief-stricken, she proceeds to IVF and barely escapes an episode of ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome (OHSS), a condition where the abdomen fills with liquid and the ovaries can swell to the size of grapefruits. OHSS becomes a risk when doctors encourage patients or so-called egg donors to agree to take hormones that produce such an unnatural number of eggs: it is not uncommon for clinics to harvest twenty to thirty eggs in a single cycle, versus the single egg ovaries are wont to produce each month.

During her IVF, B slips into dangerous emotional territory when she finds herself regarding the three viable embryos with growing maternal attachment, referring to them as her "two girls and a boy." We have cause to doubt that B has digested just how slim her odds of a live IVF birth are: the National Institutes of Health notes that for women forty and over, an IVF cycle has only a 14 percent chance of succeeding.

The European Society for Human Reproduction and Embryology estimates that of the 1.5 million IVF cycles performed annually, roughly 1.2 million do not result in a live birth. This translates into a global IVF per-cycle failure rate of almost 80 percent across all age groups. While the industry and media sells happily-ever-after ART stories, *millions* of women's and men's disappointment, pain, and damaged health remain invisible and unacknowledged.

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the birth of the world's first IVF baby. The industry and media will no doubt continue promoting the mythology of ART's ability to outsmart Mother Nature

while omitting discussion about the sad outcomes and risks endured by millions of patients. The desire to control that which causes us pain is a natural inclination. We humans are vulnerable creatures, looking for miracles and hope where none might exist. It is not a sin to romanticize innovation, but we must be mindful that it does not elude our need for self-protection and our ability to choose wisely.

Extreme Pregnancy

Andrea Long Chu

HAVING A CHILD, like heterosexuality, is a very stupid idea. It will not end well—for you, your friends, the planet. Others may applaud and encourage you. Do not be deceived: they are just being nice. Children are a cancer. Shulamith Firestone’s program in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) isn’t just insane for wanting to outsource childbirth to the machines. The automation of gestational labor is a modest proposal next to the notion that humankind should be reproducing at all. What’s crazier, believing in people pods or just believing in people? Compare Valerie Solanas in the *SCUM Manifesto* (1967), skeptical of even her own plan for cybernetic parthenogenesis: “Why should there be future generations? What is their purpose?”

But I banked my sperm anyway, begrudgingly persuaded by childful friends who counseled, with the sagacity that grows, like a polyp, in every woman’s womb, that the urge to procreate might strike me later in life with all the flexibility of a midnight craving. I did it early in transition, before hormones, using money I had extorted from my parents, then still in sackcloth and ashes over the death of their son. At

the cryobank, I was directed to a small windowless beige room, like an examination room in which you were expected to be your own doctor. On one wall, there was a television, vaguely operable by remote; they must have assumed that everyone would just use their phone. On the adjoining wall hung a pair of penciled nudes that managed, somehow, to signify tastefulness without actually going to the trouble of being tasteful. There were tissues, and magazines, and a sink. It was a place empty of sex, but full of its idea.

They were the most expensive orgasms of my life. At my third visit, the technician told me she'd collected thirteen vials—four times the average. It was as if my reproductive organs, anxiously aware of their imminent unemployment, were putting in the best job performance of their careers. The pride ashamed me.

I have no desire for children, which is easy to say when you've got spunk in the bank. I'm sympathetic with the idea of it, though: the idea of submitting your very substance to a senseless, deleterious, and basically selfish science experiment more or less guaranteed to run your politics off the road. Sex change, like having a child, is a very stupid idea. I'm not even supposed to write *sex change*; I'm supposed to write *gender confirmation surgery*, as if all the doctors did was to throw your inner woman a big thumbs-up. That's ridiculous, obviously. Later this year, I will pay another person a lot of money to carve me into a different shape. She will probably do a good job, but it will be disappointing anyway. What I want isn't surgery; what I want is never to have needed surgery to begin with. I will never be natural, but I will die trying.

Merve Emre presents the stories of her interviewees as evidence that all reproduction is, and should be, assisted, not "natural." But these stories are equally proof of just how hard it is to give up nature as an object of desire. Even queer theorists are sobered

to learn the sex of an embryo. So when Emre proposes we expose the lie of nature, I'm not so sure. I'm alienated by the discourse around the natural, sure, but only the same way I'm alienated by the skinny white girls with dead eyes and bare midriffs who herald, like dandelions, the arrival of summer in New York City. Unfold my political critique at its creases, and you will be left with nothing but flat, blank envy. That doesn't mean nature isn't a lie. It just means that we never believed in it because it was true; we believed in it because we wanted to.

This is my way of saying what I think Emre means when she writes, "people's bodies are unruly sites for politics." It's an observation she makes of micha cárdenas's *Pregnancy* (2009), to which it applies if only by accident. cárdenas does indeed perform the ambivalence of reproduction, but not without arming herself with political buzzwords clearly intended to pack a moral punch. "oh the privilege of / cis-hetero reproduction!" the poet exclaims, a laptop sticker of a line sure to win righteous snaps from the mostly cisgender queers who are spending their Tuesday night at this independent bookstore in Oakland. I prefer Joanne Spataro, who longs in the *New York Times* to make a baby with her trans fiancée "the way fertile cisgender people do." She makes no attempt to justify this desire politically. She wouldn't be able to, anyway.

In childbirth, there is too much blood, too much meat, too much of the thinginess of the thing for politics. Remember: pregnancy is a form of body modification so extreme that its result is another person. In this, it resembles nothing—except, perhaps, sex change. In the course of each, you will finally come upon the edge of something taut and smooth and, though you cannot see it, palpably immense, its hard surface slowly rolling beneath your palm like the tide, a pattern that, after hours or months of standing

there, you will suddenly recognize as breathing. Call it nature, or don't; call it reality, or having a body, or none of those things. It is the Elephant in the Room, and you may call it anything you like, for it is a gentle thing and terrible, indifferent and alive, and intentionless as the sky.

A Right to Reproduce

Merve Emre

I AM GRATEFUL to all the respondents for their thoughtful engagement with my essay. Part of the challenge I set for myself in writing this piece was to let the stories of individual women make palpable certain political and ethical binds, desires, fantasies, and ideologies regarding reproduction and reproductive justice. These binds, desires, fantasies, and ideologies become especially marked when women are confronted with systemic inequalities such as access to insurance, healthcare, and maternity leave, not to mention concerns about biologized claims to guardianship, physical safety, and bodily integrity. These inequalities, in turn, continue to go unnoticed when reproductive rights become synonymous with an individual woman's choice not to reproduce, as is the case in much mainstream discourse about reproduction in the Western world.

It is a straightforward argument, a familiar argument to some, but not an especially well-rehearsed one. The impetus for my essay was my frustration with how many feminist techno-materialists advocating for universal access to reproductive technologies continue to occlude

the gap between the personal and the political that Andrea Long Chu and Irina Aristarkhova discuss in their responses. There was, for me, a marked absence of specific, embodied accounts from these discussions. By contrast, embodiment *is* admirably modeled as a critical discourse in the writing of feminists of color, most recently in the extraordinary collection of essays *Radial Reproductive Justice* (2017), edited by Loretta J. Ross, Lynn Roberts, Erika Derkas, Whitney Peoples, and Pamela Bridgewater Toure. Yet in that collection, reproductive technology is presented as fully coextensive with eugenics. I was interested in thinking about how these two strands of thought—feminist technomaterialism and reproductive justice—can be brought into conversation with one another in a way that allows for a maximally inclusive feminism.

While I begin the piece by tracing the historical opposition between nature and technology in feminist manifestos, it is a misreading of my argument to assert that I choose one side over another; that would be an untenable and uninteresting position. (At one point, the working title of the piece was “Let Us Now Praise Artificial Wombs,” which I hoped readers would take as a tongue-in-cheek reference to James Agee and Walker Evans’s 1941 classic *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, not a paean.) As I suggest toward the end of the introduction, the natural—as a normalizing but ever-shifting discourse of affective, temporal, and somatic practices that are defined and redefined through new iterations of technological intervention—reemerges at precisely the moments we believe we have transcended it. This was one reason for choosing to stage my argument through narrative rather than through a series of universalizing imperatives or polemics. For it is narrative that lets us move with an appropriate degree of ambivalence, humility, and sympathy from the specificity of an individual to political and ethical scales.

I do not think the women I interviewed would want us to read their stories as heartbreaking; it is too easy to dismiss heartbreak.

I think they would want us to read them as one method of thinking and feeling politically about the desire to reproduce when all options appear compromised and anathema to one's flourishing—a version of what Lauren Berlant has deemed “cruel optimism.” On the one hand, there is the exclusionary logic of naturalism in its consumerist, mass-mediated, and legally sanctioned guises; on the other, there are the classist, ableist, and racialized implications of technological intervention that Marcy Darnovsky, Miriam Zoll, Annie Menzel, and Chris Kaposy highlight in their responses. For this reason, I find especially helpful the responses that talk about the value of different versions of the natural from the ones I invoke at the outset of my piece: Chu's wise, wild, funny, and immensely compelling assessment of the natural as an object of desire—a desire that is loosely threaded through all the stories I relay; and Tober's smart argument that the natural can be used subversively to affirm marginalized identities—something I hinted at, but did not develop, in my reading of Spataro's op-ed on trans fertility.

It is true that my argument was limited to the United States, and that I did not touch on the transnational market for surrogacy, which has been admirably documented in recent books by Anindita Majumdar, Sayantani DasGupta, Amrita Pande, and Sharmila Rudrappa. As several respondents point out, I did not speak to women who “donated their eggs for money”—a troubling oxymoron. I wanted to, but, for reasons of confidentiality and anonymity, it was difficult to find women who could talk or wanted to talk. This may not be a satisfying answer, but it is a true one, and it opens onto a larger point I should have emphasized in the piece: it is easier to find and persuade women to talk to you about fertility when they think they are producing and consuming reproductive material outside an explicit system of market exchange, a market that makes inequalities of race and class even more glaring.

At the same time, I think several of the responses are too quick to conflate access with privilege. Indeed, part of my point was to encourage feminists who make arguments based on access to think more carefully and granularly about the distinction between the two as it pertains to reproductive labor. I am not sure my argument would change were I to narrate the stories of women who were in more markedly disadvantaged situations; the basic point about assisted reproduction would remain the same even if the details of the cases differed.

Kaposy is right that reproductive technologies encourage many women to use the language of economic decision-making—optimization, just-in-time production, hedging, a whole list of acronyms only legible to the initiated—to orient themselves and their offspring to a new biopolitical reality. Individual choices, like genetic testing, are informed by technological constraints. In aggregate, these choices, no matter how individually agonizing or complex, amplify certain discriminatory ideologies. More important for my purposes is that the explicitness of their language makes visible the fact that gestation is work, as Sophie Lewis argues, and as work, it is unevenly distributed and unequally rewarded. This is true not only under neoliberalism, but in general since industrial modernity articulated the division between productive and reproductive labor.

I have been intrigued by Lewis's notion of anti-work gestational labor since I started researching this piece, as I think it offers real political promise around realizing a positive right to reproduce. I am grateful to her and Menzel for adding necessary context to the argument that comes at the end of the piece: that feminists of color, scholar-activists, and queer families have been pioneers in modeling and theorizing assisted reproduction. I agree wholeheartedly, and I wish I had discussed my indebtedness to their work more thoroughly at the essay's beginning and end. One of my favorite parts of *Radical Reproductive Justice* is Lynn

Roberts's "On Becoming and Being a Mother in Four Movements," in which Roberts, who has raised two "chosen children" through adoption, highlights her sister's decision to go "to great lengths and tremendous debt" to conceive through IVF. She points out that she and her sister have both raised children who were not biologically related to them—a challenge that seems to have deepened not only their family ties but expanded their kinship system. I think we see similar experiences of expansion in the uncompensated care work that gleams through several of the narratives: the women who care for B and help her pay for her IVF; the #ttc communities that K joins even when she feels like an "affect alien" in them; the Facebook group for trans women that shows *cárdenas* how to counter the myths of sterility. It is no accident that S, the person most caught up in the neoliberalization of reproductive technologies, is also the person who seems the most alone.

I was thinking about this in a roundabout way the other evening because, at the behest of my editor, I was reading Dr. Seuss's 1940 picture book *Horton Hatches the Egg* to my toddler. It opens with a "lazy bird" named Mayzie complaining about the gestational labor she must perform. "I'm tired and I'm bored / And I've kinks in my leg / From sitting, just sitting here day after day," she sighs. "It's *work!* How I hate it!" Along comes an elephant named Horton who promises to sit on her egg so she can have a much-needed vacation. You can read his act of uncompensated trans-species surrogacy through any number of allegorical lenses—they all work—but what is more intriguing is why Horton does it in the first place. He does it because Mayzie "insists," and he is "gentle and kind." Ultimately, when I claim at the end of the piece that I want "the social to catch up with the technological," what I mean is that we need to do a more instructive job of insisting, and we need a political system that is structurally organized to mimic the kindness of intimates and strangers.

Every Woman Is a Working Woman

Silvia Federici interviewed by Jill Richards

IN 1972 feminists from Italy, England, and the United States convened in Padova, Italy, for a two-day conference. Associated with the extra-parliamentary left, anti-colonial struggles, and alternatives to the communist party, these activists composed a declaration for action, the "Statement of the International Feminist Collective." The statement rejects a separation between unwaged work in the home and waged work in the factory, pronouncing housework as a critical terrain in the class struggle against capitalism.

Silvia Federici, an Italian expat living in New York, attended the conference and afterward returned to New York to found the New York Wages for Housework Committee. In the following years, Wages for Housework committees were launched in a number of U.S. cities. In each case, these groups organized autonomously, apart from waged male workers. As "Theses on Wages for Housework" (1974) put it, "Autonomy from men is Autonomy from capital that uses men's power to discipline us."

In New York, the Wages for Housework Committee consisted of no more than twenty women, who maintained close ties with the Italian

Triveneto Committee and the Power of Women Collective in London. As Federici remembers it, there was high turnover during early years, as members discussed the paradoxical nature of the demand for a wage: was this compensation for housework, and, if so, a mere reformism that further incorporated women's labor into the capitalist system—or was the demand for a wage a subversion of housework, shifting women's social roles and identities?

These were central questions in the domestic labor debates of the 1960s to the 1980s. Though Marxist and socialist feminists had long theorized about domestic labor, these new debates focused more specifically on the political economy of women's housework in the wider arc of capitalist development. In this framework, social reproduction marks the unwaged labor of cleaning, cooking, raising children, but also the expectations of feminized care, comfort, and sex that make men's waged work in the factory possible.

For more than four decades now, Federici's scholarship and activism have been central to this work. Her writing offers a foundational account of the demand for the wage as a revolutionary act. Her influential pamphlet, *Wages Against Housework* (1975), opens with a provocative rebuttal: "They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work." In this document and others, Federici argues that demand for a wage is a critical political nexus for organizing women around a shared condition of alienated labor. The demand for the wage is impossible for capitalism to meet, and that is the point; success would entail a wholesale reconfiguration of the distribution of social wealth.

Wages Against Housework has been recently reissued by AK Press as part of the collection *Wages for Housework: The New York Committee 1972–1977: History, Theory, Documents*, edited by Federici and Arlen Austin. This collection includes a number of previously unpublished or difficult to locate pamphlets, speeches, newsletters, photographs, songs,

and media coverage. Although the collection focuses on New York, it also includes materials from Los Angeles, Iceland, Italy, Germany, and London. The texts often reject the utopian promise that new technologies will reduce the time spent on housework, freeing up time for other activities. As Federici and Nicole Cox argue in *Counter-planning from the Kitchen* (1975), the enhanced productivity enabled by new technologies does not necessarily change the isolated nature of housework or the normative family forms produced by it.

Rather than focus on the innovations that make housework look different, the following conversation considers technologies and techniques of struggle developed through feminist organizing around reproductive labor.

JILL RICHARDS: Why did your collective decide to organize separate from other activist groups that were doing related work around labor justice?

SILVIA FEDERICI: The women's movement as a whole was autonomous because it was clear that our concerns were not important to the male-dominated left. By 1969 women were leaving left organizations, such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), because every time women asked for a discussion of their oppression they were booed and silenced. It was crucial for all women's groups to organize separately from men; we would have never been able to develop an understanding of the specific forms of oppression women suffer in our society if we had remained in mixed organizations. By the time our collective formed in 1973, the need for feminist autonomy was well established.

By organizing autonomously, we created spaces where women could speak, hear each other, valorize one another's experience, and realize

that what we had to say was important. Autonomy made it possible for us to find our own voices. I must add that no feminist organization was concerned only with the question of labor justice.

JR: Can you talk about how Wages for Housework found its way to a place of deep interracial engagement, long before intersectionality was something people talked about, and at a time when women's activism was mostly divided along racial lines?

SF: The politics of Wages for Housework was shaped by women who had an understanding of capitalism, imperialism, and the anti-colonial struggle. Thus we could not accept that women's liberation could be a struggle for "equality with men" or that it could be limited to equal pay for equal work. We saw that in the same way as the racialization of black men and women had served to justify slavery, so had gender-based discrimination served to exploit women as unpaid workers in the home. This is why we supported the struggle of welfare mothers, which was led by black women—not because black women were the majority of women on welfare, which was not the case, but because black women were the most ready to struggle for their rights. They were the ones who were out in the streets saying: *Welfare is not charity. Every woman is a working woman.* They were saying, like us, that raising a child is socially necessary work. They were saying, *Don't tell us that we are parasites. Don't tell us that we are dependent on the state. When the state needs soldiers, it turns to our children. When it needs people for its factories, it turns to our children.*

So they understood that Wages for Housework would give women more power: in the short term, by having more money, by having more control over their lives, by not being forced to depend on a man or depend on whatever job came along because they would be so

desperate for some money of their own; and in the long term, by refusing to continue to give the capitalist class an immense amount of unpaid labor, as generations of women have done. And refusing to continue to ignore that the home is a sort of factory, and that domestic work is what makes every other form of work possible, as it produces the workers.

This was never meant to be a prescription for women not to work outside the home. It meant rather that when we did leave the home, we would be able to do that with more power and not out of desperation, not because we would have to accept any job that came along, just so we could have some economic autonomy.

JR: Can you comment on the wider relationship between local and international feminist movements, especially in terms of labor organizing?

SF: Capital is international, so activism against capitalism must also be international. This was something we understood when we formed the International Feminist Collective in Padova in the summer of 1972.

Organizing internationally allowed us to develop a stronger critique of capitalism than we could gain from a purely national perspective. On a day-to-day basis, it meant that our organization focused on what we could do in New York and the United States more broadly, but that we also tried regularly to have international meetings where we could exchange documents and analysis, so that we would have a broader view of the struggles we all shared.

Today, as well, we see the need for international organizing, as is happening around the issue of violence against women. Violence is not uniform; it affects some women much more profoundly than others. Clearly violence affects women of color, especially in the United States, much more intensely than it does white women. Likewise does it affect women in the Global South differently than in the North. And yet as

women we all have been raised knowing that we cannot go out at night, that we have to be careful about where we go, when, how we dress because many men will feel entitled to sexually harass us. From childhood, women of my generation were prepared for the fact that violence would be an element in our lives, that men in the streets would make humiliating or threatening comments about our bodies, that fathers and husbands could beat us and it would be tolerated.

A key turning point in feminist organizing was the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women that was held in Brussels in March 1976. Organized by feminists, the tribunal spoke to all forms of violence, not only individual or domestic violence, but also violence related to war and institutional policies. One of the limits of the movement in the United States, however, was that it focused mainly on demanding more severe penalties for the abusers, and often collaborated with the police. This was a mistake. As black women's organizations have made clear, more severe penalties end up criminalizing the men of already-victimized communities. Today the call—mostly promoted by black feminists—is for restorative justice and community accountability.

Our analysis of violence against women hinged on seeing housework as a form of capitalist production, and analyzing the role of the wage in constructing the whole family's organization. We argued that violence is always latent in the family because, through the wage, the state delegates to the husband the power to supervise and control the work of the wife, and the power to penalize her in case she does not perform. I would describe it as a sort of indirect rule: the state mediates the control over women through the man and his wage. It is not for nothing that in the 1970s, women on welfare called the state "The Man"!

This explains why domestic violence has been tolerated for so long and rarely treated by the state as a crime. We began to even see rape as a form of domestic discipline. It is a way of regulating women's time

and space: *You should not be out at night alone without your husband, you should be in your house with your children, doing housework, preparing for the next day, etc. If you are out, then be prepared, you know. . . .* The threat of rape is an unspoken discipline on women's time and space.

We must not forget, also, that violence against women is related to the abuse of children, the other major population that is subjected to violence which is not recognized as such. Children can be beaten up because, as with women, the state accepts that this is a necessary way of disciplining them, to prepare them for future forms of exploitation. And violence against women is continuous with violence against all black people, women and men, though from slavery to the present this has taken much more brutal, destructive forms. Violence is always necessary to force people to accept a subordinate place in society, to impose intense forms of exploitation.

JR: What aspects of the Wages for Housework platform were most frequently misunderstood at the time?

SF: The wider feminist movement was concerned with improving the conditions of women, but not equally concerned with transforming society away from capitalism. We felt that it was impossible to do the former without doing the latter.

Wages for Housework was misunderstood as saying, *Give us money so we can stay home, doing the same domestic work.* We actually saw wages for housework as a strategy of refusal, as a strategy giving us more options, more power to decide how to organize our lives. We were accused of "institutionalizing women in the home." But many women we met would tell us that they were already institutionalized in the home because, without any money of their own, they could not go anywhere or they could not leave their husbands even if they wanted to.

Wages for Housework was not the end goal for us, as some critics supposed—which is not to say that it was not a powerful goal in itself. We believed that the struggle for Wages for Housework would be the quickest way to force the state to give us free daycare and other key support services. Unfortunately the women’s movement has still not been able to obtain them! I think this is in part because the movement put all its energy into entering male-dominated spaces, and did not struggle to change the conditions of reproductive work, particularly in relation to domestic work, child-raising, and other forms of care work. Meanwhile, instead of providing more services to women, the state has actually reduced access even to the services that were available. Today it is more difficult to get eldercare and childcare than it was at the end of the 1960s.

Our strategy was to struggle on the terrain in which women are strongest, over issues that affect us all, such as domestic work, sexuality, and child-raising, as well as paid labor. When the issue of paid maternity leave went to the Supreme Court in 1976, few feminists supported it because they were afraid that if they were granted these “privileges,” they would never be entitled to ask for equality.

However, when by the early 1980s masses of women were entering wage work, they found that “equality” remained elusive because they still had to carry out a lot of unpaid work at home, caring for children, relatives. And then they had to fight their battles separately, each in her own workplace, and at a time when the whole organization of work was being turned upside down due to globalization. There was the dismantling of the industrial complex in the United States, with jobs going abroad, with the state cutting services—so women were entering the work force at the moment in which the roof of the factory was falling down.

JR: In what ways was your activism aided or hindered by the technology of the day?

SF: It is hard to tell. But I don't think that the lack of computers and the Internet was a problem. It meant we spent more time talking to women in the street, in laundromats, and other places where women would gather. I think that was very important, the face-to-face encounters; it helped establish better communication than is made available by encounters online. Generally I think that the Internet consumes a lot of our time but not necessarily in more politically productive ways. We are submerged by more information than we can handle, have constant requests that we cannot respond to or that force us to become very superficial in our responses. In addition, I still have stacks of letters I exchanged with women in England, Italy, and Canada, and some are like articles in the ways they analyze the political situation in these localities—a lot of thought went into these letters. There is nothing like that today. That said, I do not doubt that the Internet and computers are also opening up new possibilities.

Going to Work in Mommy's Basement

Sarah Sharma

IN FEBRUARY 2016, the Internet buzzed with news that Roosh V—a pickup artist and creator of the anti-gay, anti-feminist website Return of Kings—appeared to be hiding out in his mother's basement. Life imitates meme: the readiest insult to sling at such men—that they live in Mommy's basement—turned out in this case to be true. Roosh V's violent rhetoric really was compensating for a lack in the real world. However, the troll in Mommy's basement is no joke; he is an emerging cultural and political figure, and Mommy's basement—or its workplace analogue in the world of tech, a theme to which I will return—is an increasingly significant incubator for conservative ideas.

Of course, we must not lose sight of the fact that when we flip on the light switch in Mommy's basement, we also find Mommy. The retreat of Mommy's basement depends upon the devalued labor of caring associated with Mommy—not necessarily a specific mother, but “the Mother” in the psychoanalytic sense of attentive care feminized by virtue of its very diminishment. Indeed, the

privilege of escaping responsibility for how much one's care costs is a defining characteristic of masculine power. It is one of the ways patriarchy works.

The grown white man in his underwear in Mommy's basement is the poster boy for a new identity category, the gender separatist. A composite sketch gathered from his browser history reveals a twenty-to thirty-year-old disenchanted male and video-game addict who participates in men's rights discussion boards on sites such as Reddit and 4chan. He is perhaps an incel, having committed himself to the male abstinence movement, or else an adherent of the misogynist pickup philosophy espoused by men such as Roosh V.

A more sophisticated caricature depicts a misguided but articulate misogynist, Ivy League-educated and well versed in feminist theory. For him, the entry of women into the workplace is a feminist plot that has devalued the labor of men and created war between the sexes. Suddenly the office, boardroom, *and* bedroom are all terrains too difficult to navigate safely. For fear of rape allegations, he cannot even blow off steam by having sex with a woman. For the men of this "sexodus"—as alt-right darling Milo Yiannopoulos dubbed it—it is never the labor laws, a flawed economy, or the structural inequalities of free market capitalism that have created lean times and a precarious future. Rather, it is feminists, and, more recently, immigrants as well.

One can joke that the men of the sexodus can console themselves with games, porn, blogging, vlogging, and coding—efforts to program a world that cannot dispose of them. But I want to caution against such a simple understanding. The men of the sexodus know something about technology and gender that is worth examining. Consider this comment from Yiannopoulos:

The rise of feminism has fatally coincided with the rise of video games, internet porn, and, sometime in the near future, sex robots. With all these options available, and the growing perils of real-world relationships, men are simply walking away.

Women are situated here as simply another technological tool in this long line of media objects. And, now that women (as technological tools) have gotten a bit too out of hand, the newer, more containable models provide a seemingly better fit: images that do not talk back, love robots that will not complain. Or, if they do, they can be updated, reprogrammed. If women do not want to fulfill their positions within the patriarchy, the argument seems to go, then so be it—there are *other* technologies that will.

David Levy, author of *Love and Sex with Robots* (2007), favorably suggests in an interview, “When you have a robot around the home whether for cooking or for sex, wouldn’t it be nice to be able to have a chat with it?” We can see in these comments a deep understanding of the power of technology on gender, coupled with a hope that new technologies will distribute intimacy and care more amenably and flexibly than most *real* women do.

The alt-right likes to refer to feminism as a cancer unto the social. The feminist is the faultiest of technologies in an otherwise long line of technologies (“Mommies”) that have been designed for taking care of a male-dominated world.

In other words, feminists are useless or uncontainable technologies, like a vacuum cleaner that has lost its suction or a dishwasher that keeps leaking.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2017, James Damore made headlines when his Google internal memo leaked. It outlined how the biological differences between men and women make diversity-based hiring problematic. Yet Damore's defense of tech as a naturally male space helps us to orient our critique. Peek inside the workspaces of most successful tech companies and you will find ping-pong tables, napping pods, and bottomless snacks. That is, these spaces have a striking resemblance to Mommy's basement. Indeed, Google's official policy for its Mountain View headquarters stipulates that food must be within 200 feet of its employees at all times. And Google is not alone in offering napping pods; Uber does the same in its offices. Capital One Labs, the bank's experimental software firm, goes further, incorporating themes of childhood basement adventures into its office design, building in nooks and crannies that employees can climb into to retreat.

What kind of work is done in this "coder's cave" of antisocial tech-bro culture? What kind of world gets programmed from a position of uncomplicated safety and abundance?

About three years ago a quip began circulating on social media that the gig economy was now mostly composed of Mommy apps. Business Insider suggested that twenty-something techbros were wasting their talents designing technologies and programs for things they wished their Mommies still did for them: driving, cooking, cleaning, laundering. *Newsweek* even ran a similar story under the headline "Silicon Valley Needs Moms." The term "post-mom economy" emerged to capture this particular moment in tech(bro) culture when Uber ("Mommy, drive me"), TaskRabbit ("Mommy, clean my room"), GrubHub ("Mommy, I'm hungry"), and LiveBetter ("Mommy, I'm bored") emerged. But to suggest that these apps are designed to replace Mommy misses a key point. These services do not replicate, reproduce, or replace Mommy. Instead, they *extend* the

maternal mandate to all other care providers and expand the realm of consumption. The labor associated with Mommy merely attaches to new bodies and figures not usually associated with Mommy, while the goods and services associated with Mommy's care expand. In other words, the issue with Mommy is not just who is doing this labor, but the demands for this sort of labor in society.

What is wrong with that? Why wouldn't everyone benefit? This is, after all, paid labor, the thinking goes. Now rather than Mommy at home cooking, we get a rugged cyclist weaving through traffic with his backpack of delivery. Rather than Mommy's minivan, we have an entrepreneurial Uber driver, cast as a businessperson with a shiny new car. Rather than Mommy with a mop in one hand and a grocery list in the other, there is a TaskRabbit delivering groceries while another scrubs the floor.

Yet these gig workers are remotely accessed via logos that hide the very same personal histories, struggles, and precarious conditions that have pushed them into gig work in the first place. The gig economy is predicated on the valorization of laborers who are hustling, entrepreneurial, and innovative. But the shallowness of this praise is reflected by the fact that it is only doled out to those who are making money for the gig economy's apps: this praise has certainly not been showered on mothers or those who give maternal care when they are hard at their work. Nor has the labor of conventional taxi drivers, deliverymen, or restaurant dishwashers in jobs analogous to gig services, but which predate the gig economy, ever register as suitable for the hyper-professional, class-mobile discourse spewed by gig apps.

Thus they reveal a problem that goes beyond a matter of gender and diversity in the tech world. The classed and heteronormative obsession with work-life balance, efficiency, and time management

displayed by Mommy's-basement apps suggest that one can escape patriarchy or gendered labor in an instant—one just needs the right app! But this propaganda obscures the inescapable realities of care work that so many women, people of color, and precarious workers undertake out of survival. A Mommy's-basement world forecloses the possibility of a reconfigured technological future that is not based on exploiting the labor of others. And it co-opts the political potential of care as a category of feminist organizing.

Mommy's-basement apps are telling in how they reveal that misogyny and racism in the tech industry will not be solved by diversity-based hiring and the inclusion of women alone. Scholars such as Safiya Noble, Sarah T. Roberts, and Marie Hicks have done important work in highlighting how the history of technology and technological designs are deeply implicated in upholding racism and misogyny. We might add Mommy's basement to this mix. That these apps emerge out of Mommy's basement can explain why the classed labor of gig work seems to escape recognition. Because it is Mommy's devalued labor, it can be packaged and sold as labor not worth doing oneself. Because it is Mommy's otherwise devalued labor, it has been repackaged and sold to prospective gig workers as an enterprising and innovative system of assembling and modulating work rather than old-school care labor.

Building Mommy into our devices reflects a fear of her departure. This fear, coupled with the fear of leaving Mommy's basement, reflects the fact that, for many men, the dependence on Mommy's care is hard to shake. And if Mommy cannot or will not provide that care anymore, perhaps a new machine can—or, if not the machine itself, a marginalized other summoned via machine. Thus the post-Mommy economy of Silicon Valley dispenses Mommy without dispensing *of* Mommy, while more deeply entrenching neoliberalism's exploitative

relationships. Simultaneously, this arrangement allows—encourages—app users to disengage from the social world without a thought for what a sustainable life might mean for others.

What is patriarchy other than antisociality anyway? But it is exactly the ruse of harmless escapist media and impotent retreat that enables misogyny to guide those at the helm of the tech industry. Tech is not antisocial after the fashion of a quiet loner minding his own business; tech is antisocial because it is inimical to all that is incompatible with itself. Working with tech is never about minding one's business. Following from Marshall McLuhan, we might say that technologies are environments that are inherently social, in which all of social life unfolds. But we must correct this sort of universalist notion within the tech industry and recognize that technologies are environments that are inherently social—at least, for all that will *fit*. Our media technologies set the parameters of what is possible. Technologies alter conceptions and experiences of time, space, distance—as well as gender and social difference. Technologies alter what it means to be human and what it means to be in relation to one another.

THE ROLE THAT GENDER PLAYS in tech is poorly understood in a myriad of ways. Raising the topic will almost always elicit responses about women *in* the tech industry. Or insiders will say something about how technology is a tool that *different kinds* of people just use differently or have different types of access to. Thus the notion of “gendered technology” may be taken simply to gloss the variable access to technological resources ostensibly produced by gender. Such assumptions invigorate the belief that the Internet can be

an emancipatory technology for women, LGBTQ people, or other marginalized populations, as though it were a blank slate they can configure to match them perfectly, hand to glove.

A different version of “gendered technologies” is the one created by marketing execs, in which objects become gendered through design and promotion. An iPhone is made pink, for example, or is said to be adapted to women’s bodies in some way (though there is no consensus about what women’s bodies “want”: smaller devices? larger? rounder, perhaps?). In some cases, there is a related backlash, in which technologies will be critiqued precisely for how they are *not* made for women’s bodies, such as the pacemaker which never took *her* heart into consideration. Such responses call attention to an obvious paradox at the core of patriarchal society: if it is going to insist on the naturalness of gendered differences, then why do so many technologies actually ignore the differences between women’s and men’s bodies? Because it is a fallacy. The technology that comes out of Mommy’s basement will never liberate Mommy *from* the basement. It is about control and the maintenance of power.

None of this will be corrected by the current frantic wave of inclusion in the world of tech. That is too often just about showing good face. It is not enough. This is not to say that tech is not full of subversive actors who are organizing and pushing for a more equitable technological future. The industry is not a monolithic enterprise full of only techbros—but the future depends on more than representation, it depends on designing media environments that are aware of the social and how the social is reproduced through care. Accounting for gender and diversity in the tech industry means contending with the normative regimes of care built into our technologies. It is not enough to remedy the fact that women are being sexually harassed at Uber. Something altogether different and better than Uber must

also be created. Mommy's basement has been and will continue to be a coveted venue for misogyny. But those who dwell in Mommy's basement can also be evicted. The first step is to serve notice that the rent owed Mommy is overdue.

Sharma

Aging into Feminism

James Chappel

WE ARE IN THE MIDST of a world-historical demographic transition. Within a few years, the number of people in the world over the age of sixty-five will surpass the number of those under five. This is a fundamental transformation in the human species, and it presents a problem. Our ethical and political categories were designed for a world of the young. From Plato onward, our philosophers have lavished attention on education while almost entirely neglecting end-of-life care. Over the centuries, we have obsessed over how to interpret and shape a social world that has now aged out of existence.

This is an opportunity for feminism, the intellectual and political tradition best suited for our graying world. After all, feminists have done the most to valorize the labor of caring for those who cannot fully care for themselves. That said, the tradition's focus has mainly been on parenting, and on the many women faced with the double burden of social reproduction (motherhood) and economic production (labor). That task is noble and unfinished; however, it is not enough on its own. The emancipatory feminism of the future, if such a thing

will exist, will teach us not only how to parent and how to work, but how to age well and justly.

The feminism of the twentieth century responded to the call of Swedish feminist Ellen Key, who in 1900 proclaimed the advent of the Century of the Child. She saw that the population was about to explode, and that the century would be dominated by questions about the education and citizenship of the millions of youth crowding new schools and militaries. Were Ellen Key to bestow a name upon our new age of plummeting birthrates and skyrocketing life expectancies, she might call it the Century of the Elderly. This is a century that requires a new style of thinking, and a new kind of feminism.

The dilemma is, in essence, the same as the one faced in the twentieth century. Will the demographic transition of our times be met in ways that reproduce a corrupt system, or in ways that contest it? So far, we seem to be opting for the former. Most responses to global aging have not been political, or even very creative, but rather technocratic. With better-designed pension systems and robotic personal assistants, perhaps, the elderly can be carefully managed—and in ways that create massive pension funds for investment, and massive opportunities for profit.

As we attempt to leverage global aging in the name of global justice, the best tools are unlikely to come from technology companies, and very likely to come from the feminist tradition. Old age is primarily a concern for women, which is surely one reason that it has not received much critical attention. Globally, women live longer, on average, than men—about four to seven years longer, in economically stable countries. At the same time, the massive need for eldercare is met mainly by women. Most eldercare in this country and others is done off the grid by female family members, often tasked with caring for their own dependent children at the same time. When that is

insufficient, as it frequently is, the elderly often rely on home health aides, who tend to be women as well.

Feminists have long been drawing attention to the issue of aging. Indeed, it seems to be an occupational hazard of feminist intellectual life that one must write a book on the subject at some point in one's sixties or seventies. Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan both dedicated their last substantive books to it, and many have followed in their wake. In the last few years alone, Lynne Segal, Martha Nussbaum, and Barbara Ehrenreich have published books on old age. They have performed the necessary and feminist labor of describing the process of aging from the inside, and they have described their attempts to personally come to grips with the transformations of their bodies. And yet a critical shortfall of this literature is that it has not offered a genuinely transformative and intersectional project. These authors, often scathing and radical in their accounts of motherhood and the workplace, have not brought the same social imagination to their accounts of aging.

A critical engagement with aging has to be intersectional because the issue is imbricated with all the other vectors of injustice in our society. Elderly African Americans, suffering from unequal health outcomes and the incarceration of a generation, are more likely than elderly whites to age alone and to face crises of care. This was notable in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, where issues of climate, race, poverty, and segregation viciously compounded one another. An as in the 2003 European heat wave, the immobile and the frail were most exposed when the levees broke. A clear majority of the victims were over the age of sixty—beneficiaries of the advances in medicine and public health that allowed them to survive for so long, and victims of a society that has not reorganized itself to take account of that success.

It is important to note that our crisis of aging cannot be reduced to a caricature of the young, in their folly, neglecting their elders. That timeworn cliché is irrelevant in a world where middle-aged people perform vast feats of labor to care for their parents, and where the policies that ravage the elder population were put in place by political leaders who are themselves often quite old. The issue, instead, is that we have not, as a society, arrived at a coherent understanding of what it means to age well. If the feminism of the future is to be responsive to the demographics of the future, it should provide one.

THE STATUS QUO for the elderly, and especially for elderly women, is neither sustainable nor desirable. In it the massive inequalities generated by contemporary forms of capitalism extend into our twilight years. This of course means that some of us can look forward to a comfortable old age of leisure and reflection. The happy few likely includes me and many of you—but we should not be so sure. The vagaries of love, disease, and political economy can bring even the most secure of us into financial ruin. We would then join the many who are already scrambling to scrape together a living and a care regimen with the help of underfunded federal programs, underpaid labor by undocumented immigrants, and unpaid labor by female relatives.

This much and more is revealed in two recent books on the subject: *Nomadland* (2017), an eye-opening work of journalism by Jessica Bruder, and *The Age of Dignity* (2015), a clarion call for a new approach to aging by the activist and organizer Ai-jen Poo. The former shows how capital is exploiting the elderly themselves, while the latter shows how the same process is ravaging the lives of their caretakers. Together they suggest that the magnificent expansion of the lifespan is being subsumed by

the logic of neoliberalism. Here, as elsewhere, the great successes of the twentieth century are devoured by the locusts of the twenty-first.

Bruder's *Nomadland* chronicles the surprising number of elderly people who have abandoned their homes and started living in their vans. While technically homeless, they prefer to call themselves "homeless." Most suffered a combination of blows: lost jobs, failed marriages, and healthcare disasters chief among them. Financial and communal resources might be enough to deal with one crisis, but together they conspire to place downward pressure on these stalwart veterans of the middle class. With her journalist's eye, Bruder uncovers colorful characters, most memorably a vibrant woman named Linda May. For years, May has been living in her old yellow van, which she affectionately calls the Squeeze Inn. Together with a motley crew of largely female comrades, she has crisscrossed the West, performing all sorts of labor for scandalously low wages.

May and her friends are the ideal labor force for our new century: perfectly mobile, and perfectly disposable. They have no choice but to labor, given the paltry size of their Social Security checks (this is an issue especially for women, given the depressed wages they receive throughout their working lives). You have seen them. These are the people taking tickets at the state fair or tidying up campsites at national parks. They do the sorts of invisible and menial labor that cannot be outsourced. Remarkably, some also do agricultural labor, particularly on the sugar-beet farms of the Midwest. And while they sleep in the parking lots of Walmart, they labor for its gravedigger, Amazon. Through its CamperForce program, Amazon enlists the mobile precariat into its e-commerce machine, sending aged bodies plodding through vast warehouses, powered by complementary pain pills. Once the holiday rush comes to a close, the "workcampers" climb back into their vans and hit the road once again.

It might seem that Bruder's protagonists have fallen through the cracks of the system, but this would be the wrong way to think about it. In the absence of a robust social program, this is the system: they work for our parks; they take advantage of policing protocols that tacitly allow white elders to sleep in parking lots; they live partially on whatever Social Security income they have; and they work for huge government-subsidized companies such as Amazon that are at the forefront of our new economy. They are scraping together work in a "gig economy" that affords them precious few protections and resources, while calling upon all of their creativity and strength. They are at the bleeding edge of neoliberal consolidation, and the only difference between them and their children might be that they can remember a time when they were promised something different.

RELATIVELY FEW ELDERLY PEOPLE live in vans the way Bruder's subjects do. But contrary to what one might expect, very few Americans sixty-five or older live in nursing homes or assisted living facilities, either—only about 6 percent. The vast majority prefer to, or have no choice but to, remain in their own homes, where family members provide the bulk of the necessary care labor. This work is most often the province of daughters, a sort of gendered care labor that, for all of its emotional and financial costs, has received far less attention than the reproductive labor of mothering. This system, if it deserves that name, is reaching the breaking point. Elongated lifespans and delayed childbearing have pushed millions of Americans into the so-called "sandwich generation," caring for children and aged relatives simultaneously (one in seven of us fall into this category). They perform heroic and often invisible feats of care labor in private, often at great personal cost to their own careers and well-being.

In her heartbreaking *The Age of Dignity*, Poo brings this sort of labor out of the shadows. Poo is director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance and codirector of Caring Across Generations, a campaign dedicated to improving long-term care provision in the United States. The myth of the benevolent and beloved grandparent is not wrong, according to Poo, but it is certainly incomplete. Millions of U.S. families, faced with aging parents and a frayed safety net, find themselves performing feats of unglamorous care labor—labor that, unlike the corollary of childcare, is not socially valorized and does not open up new arenas of sociability. Even in the best cases, where the caring relative is able to access government support and keep her job, the task is onerous and often isolating. For many, it is catastrophic. Poo shares stories of people who leave their job to care for ailing parents, only to be denied unemployment assistance and cast into financial ruin. Others are let go from their jobs as the emotional stress of caregiving diminishes their capacity.

For the many millions of elderly with severe dementia, or without nearby family, this “system” is unworkable. Hence the rise of the home health aide, one of the fastest-growing sectors of the economy. There are currently about 2 million home health aides in the United States—mainly women of color, often undocumented, and usually without healthcare of their own—and in the future there will be millions more. Their labor, like that of the sandwich generation, is necessary to the health and well-being of the body politic, and it is equally invisible. Poo’s book brings it out of the shadows, sharing stories of immigrant caregivers who mediate complex family dynamics, mind-boggling bureaucracy, and difficult lives of their own. Their labor is precarious, and they are open to abuse on all fronts. Many of them become emotionally involved in their employers’ households and feel compelled to perform uncompensated work. Nearly a quarter are paid less than minimum wage.

If current trends continue, the elder boom will be met with the same response as other social and demographic changes in our dismal century: with precarious, gendered, and unorganized labor, performed both by the elderly and by their caretakers. Bruder and Poo make this clear in a way that other feminist literature on aging does not. One of the main tasks of their books is to bring hidden stories of bodies and care into the open, which has long been a basic tool of feminist praxis. They both pursue the corollary, too: the utilization of those stories to ground new theories of social change.

WHAT WE NEED are creative, intersectional ways to think about old age that help us to reframe global aging as a blessing and an opportunity. Both Bruder and Poo, in very different ways, help us to do so. Both authors are in awe of the vitality, energy, and creativity that the elderly and their caretakers display, even in the most desperate of circumstances. These are stories of suffering and deprivation, yes, but they are also stories of hope.

Poo brings to life the vast network of caregivers who, despite all of the challenges they face, find the time and the energy to organize. Just as Naomi Klein wants us to use the climate crisis to create a new and more just world, Poo and her collaborators are optimistic that the changing shape of the species will nudge us toward new communities of care and concern—communities that will enlist all of us, not just the elderly.

Poo has a raft of potential solutions in mind. She calls for labor organization among domestic workers and has spearheaded some of that work herself. She calls for innovative new housing arrangements that would make intergenerational community a matter of urban planning

rather than dewy nostalgia. She calls for a dramatic expansion of Social Security, alongside new tax-funded benefits, to pay for the home care that many of us will, one day, need. In the end, though, her idea is simple: as more and more of our jobs are automated out of existence, our aging population opens up vast new opportunities for care labor, work that has the potential to be fulfilling, organized, and adequately compensated.

Poo's is fundamentally a vision for caretakers, although a valorization of care labor would certainly benefit its recipients as well. Bruder, on the other hand, is more concerned with the elderly themselves and their attempts to forge new styles of living. Bruder's characters often encounter moments of despair, especially when the realities of healthcare on the run collide with the grueling labor they are asked to do. And yet the reader's more general impression is that May and her friends are astonishingly vibrant and creative. The point is not that they seem "young," but that they seem engagingly old.

May especially is a force of nature, and she refuses to define herself as a woman in decline or as the victim of a fraying U.S. experiment. Like many of Bruder's subjects, she prefers to see herself as a pioneer in the forging of a new American dream. While we should not romanticize her plight, we should not pity her either. She and her peers gather around quasi-utopian communities, online and in deserts, devoted to anti-consumerist values. They create shadow economies of books and techniques; they forge new friendships and they fall in love. They have, in other words, much to give—and one suspects we are all worse off because so much of that energy is spent living precariously and under exploitative working conditions. *Nomadland* is, in the end, a book about the creation of new kinds of life amidst the wreckage of economic exclusion. For May, economic depression can be an opportunity for reinvention, and for the recovery of forms of freedom and community undercut by an exhausted capitalism.

Today's seventy-year-olds, it should be remembered, were twenty in 1968. At least some of them are trying to reimagine and politicize old age just as they once did with youth. New ideas for how to age in a just and sustainable way, that is, can come from today's elderly, and in fact this is already happening. Despite the obvious carbon intensity of their lifestyles, many of Bruder's subjects hope to live off the land. While the abandonment of their brick-and-mortar past was a personal tragedy for all of them, they have used it as an opportunity to rethink the nature of "home." In the process, they are beginning to imagine how it might be possible for all of us to live eighty years without destroying the climate. May's Squeeze Inn, for instance, is filled with notebooks and plans for her proposed future dwelling: a self-sustaining, environmentally friendly home, made largely out of trash, and known as an Earthship. The idea comes from a pioneering green architect of May's generation named Michael Reynolds (now in his seventies). The book ends with May's struggle to make the Earthship a reality, and the reader is left in suspense. The decision is a canny one, for May's struggle is really all of ours, and the outcome is undecided.

Bruder and Poo point the way toward a properly feminist grappling with the Century of the Elderly. They remind us that old age need not be dreary to think about, or to experience. The solutions to the elder boom are not just medical and actuarial. They are also political. We often think of old age as a sort of perverse accompaniment to adolescence: a time free of economic cares, when we can finally become the individual we always hoped to be. This way of framing the issue occludes collective solutions to what is ultimately a collective problem. There are two paths ahead of us: one direction is familiar, and it involves lining the pockets of Jeff Bezos at the expense of the elderly. The other is the path not taken, and it leads West. While Bezos funnels

his billions into spaceships, May is patiently collecting trash in the Arizona desert, and using technology in a very different way. Her Earthship, should it ever come to be, would help turn the wreckage of our decaying system into something new: a habitat fit for the gray and hot century before us.

A History of Cyborg Sex, 2018–73

Cathy O'Neil

A LOT OF PEOPLE don't know this, but we once thought cyborg sex might be a bad idea. Back in the 2010s, serious concerns were raised by prominent scholars that sex robots were made by men, for men. The general consensus was that cyborg sex would further support the notion that women's bodies were available for objectification, sexual gratification, and violence.

Indeed, in the dawn of sex robots and dolls, the evidence was concerning: we saw hordes of male customers, and the robots were typically created to mimic young, passive sex bimbos. Men were even losing the ability to differentiate between "real" and "robot" wives, and people feared that the advent of robot lovers would further create asymmetry in the "marriage market" for women—that women would be confined and pressured into settling for archaic, misogynistic, or even abusive romantic situations.

In short, the advent of cyborg sex was seen as destabilizing, and it was largely expected to tilt the power further toward men.

Now, more than fifty years later, that curious beginning is laughably remote from our current-day relationship with our cyborg lovers, and the evolution of cyborg sex warrants telling.

Phase 1: How we all got cyborg playmates

Cyborg companions were originally elitist playthings, since they were so expensive to design and build. A decade in, however, we discovered their power for “social hygiene training,” and cyborg companions were soon made mandatory for all school children.

Getting the various political parties to agree to this was, of course, no trivial matter, but the results spoke for themselves. The cyborgs were remarkably effective at training students in everything from calculus to patriotism—better than any previous known method—and given that this was during the final push to privatize public education once and for all, cyborg companions turned out to be a surprisingly bipartisan deal.

The overwhelming problem of funding individual cyborg tutors for every school child was also easily solved when BezosCloud—the optimization engine that took over after Jeff Bezos himself retired—pitched in and gave away cyborgs for free to every man, woman, and child in exchange for all of the associated data. (There was also a tacit agreement to delay antitrust measures against BezosCloud for its grip on the world’s supply chain.)

The transition was easy for the children who had grown up on Alexa, Google Assistant, and Siri. These children were able to relate to their tutors as people do to each other. Their parents, aided by newly legal pot and innovative therapy sessions for “connecting,” eventually got the hang of it too.

Crucially, a “common platform” was negotiated, which allowed for independent engineers and designers to have modification control. That is when things really got cooking. Cyborg companions evolved into teachers, friends, and, eventually, lovers.

Phase 2: Oasis

While it is difficult to see now, students of history must understand that, until the 2050s, men were considered to be violent. Mainstream TV and movies had hopped-up action and fight scenes because most people actually believed that physical muscle strength served as a defense from our own sense of puny helplessness in an uncertain world. We know now, of course, that this was a very misguided metaphor, but the threat of masculine violence was once a crucial factor in understanding the dynamics of sex and power.

Once people had their own robot companions and tutors, an important and largely unforeseen consequence was that women gained safety from men. The data was readily available, and it was clear: sex with robots was *much* safer than sex with actual men.

After some further tweaking, which included extensive training from the sex industry (by then all celebrities), the sex got better than anything women had previously experienced. A new environment of sex-positiveness emerged, in which young women were encouraged to discover what they enjoyed and what they did not, and they felt safe and comfortable expressing those desires.

This education and freedom to explore was equally valuable to LGBTQ youth since everyone was now empowered to discover which type of happy-ending massages they wanted after class or work. Stories of uncomfortable or unpleasant sexual encounters joined the ash heap of history.

Sexual harassment on the job, which back then was widespread and deeply detrimental, also plummeted. The cyborg companions came to work, both recording everything that went on between colleagues and protecting their humans, including from managers, attorneys general, and presidents. Women, for the first time, got the pay they deserved.

Phase 3: The age of cyborg sex addiction

While cyborg sex started out as more or less the same as what sex workers offered—except on-demand and free—over time people demanded more and, ironically, less. What once seemed impossible—that an algorithm could stoke true desire—became reality.

Actual concrete knowledge about eroticism and desire, which until then had been largely anecdotal and therapy-centered, became the largest single body of data the world had ever seen. And the key takeaway was that not knowing what would happen—and whether one would truly get satisfaction from one's cyborg—was key to desire.

Actually getting satisfaction most of the time helped, of course, but during this phase an army of underpaid virtual sex workers—the famous Mechanical Sex Turks—added content to the BezosCloud that delighted, surprised, and shocked their audiences.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, a substantial portion of women who had the means and opportunity began to prefer their robot companions to their boyfriends or husbands. Women started taking the long way to work, their banging cyborgs giving them (or denying them) blowjobs in the back seats of self-driving cars. (Self-driving cars had, at this point, become standard private booths of victimless sin.)

Quite a few women lost interest in human men altogether, especially once their robots became fully functional and able to insert mail-order sperm to tailored specs. (Penis accessories for cyborgs were, by this time, optional and even somewhat rare; their presence signaled that a woman was likely trying to conceive.)

Men's path forward was not easy, but then again it was not torturous; there was gender parity, after all. Everyone, including men, had access to their own sex robots, which had been trained by tailored porn algorithms to give mind-blowing sexual experiences.

But this was back when viewing women as property was a part of the masculine ideal. Frankly, men had more to lose, and their sense of entitlement to women's bodies was severed quickly and completely during the cyborg sex revolution.

Given that there were no robot wives that could conceive, the imperatives were clear, at least to the men who wanted children. Actual men were reduced to begging.

For the younger men, resocializing and retraining was relatively straightforward. Namely, there emerged an industry—a subculture of the by-then sophisticated VR gaming industry—which offered to train men to compete with the robots, in bed and out. Advertisements on the inside of self-driving cabs read, “Put in some practice in VR, bro!”

The rise of “sex scores” for men privileged the deft peacocks with great hand-eye coordination who deeply understood the concept of consent and could whip up a mean quinoa and spinach frittata.

Some men surrendered altogether, so-called men-who-live-without-women whose identity was entirely wrapped up in nursing their grudges. They even tried, in vain, to stage boycotts of the sperm bank industry. But since their chosen identity was pretty much a guarantee against being wanted as a sperm donor in the first place, the boycott campaign failed. The women, who already had everything they wanted did, barely noticed.

To be sure, there was a sliver of humanity, of all genders and sexual orientations, who still met up in person, sometimes without cyborg companions. But their numbers were small enough to have a diminutive effect on the overall balance of power.

Phase 4: The fall of sex scores, the rise of sex therapy

With the help of female-led engineering and design teams (who had by this time perfected their creative skills on the common platform), women and men began thorough and sometimes all-consuming quests for sexual identity.

Cyborg sex therapy started with experimental story lines that dealt with the power dynamics among humans and the prevailing questions of identity and gender. Most often, these stories took the form of celebrity extremes. You could be Monica under the desk blowing Bill. Then you could be Monica at the desk with Bill below, positions reversed. You could be Stormy Daniels spanking Trump, or Trump under the desk blowing Obama.

The unexpected side effect of all of this sex play was a deepening sympathy for people on both sides of the power spectrum. Men felt fear or coercion. Women felt threatening and powerful. Gender went beyond fluidity to gaseous if not plasmatic. And that shared sense of humanity led to the next, most exploratory phase of cyborg sex in virtual reality: eroticized generalized concepts.

Beyond gender, beyond the animal kingdom, you could be the moon fucking the sun, experience a single cell's orgasmic multiplication, or thrill in a flower's pollination.

Phase 5: Present day

We emerged from this therapeutic phase to a world in which everyone is well fucked and cherished in the way they want. Gender, finally, is truly meaningless. And while inequalities still exist, power imbalances have been stripped of their tendency toward domination.

The grand irony here is that people became dehumanized as they became more cyborged and yet people have never felt so well cared for. Society finally concluded that everyone deserves good sex as part of a good life, but not necessarily with each other.

Now that we don't expect humans—let alone a particular gender—to fill that role, our interactions with other have improved. We ask less of each other, but we connect more, be it virtually or in reality. In short, we have all become more human now that we are fully coupled with cyborgs.

When Gays Wanted to Liberate Children

Michael Bronski

IN 1972 MEMBERS OF Boston's Gay Men's Liberation, one of the most significant Gay Liberation groups formed after the 1969 Stonewall riots, drove to Miami to hand out a ten-point list of demands at the Democratic National Convention. Emerging from a crucible of new queer political consciousness, feminism, and rage, the manifesto articulated a utopian political vision that was broad—today, we might say intersectional—extending far beyond what we would now conceptualize as LGBT politics. Its first demand, for example, was for “an end to any discrimination based on biology. Neither skin color, age nor gender should be recorded by any government agency. Biology should never be the basis for any special legal handicap or privilege.”

If many of Gay Men's Liberation's demands remain controversial forty-five years later, most are also still legible in today's political discourse: the group sought to end U.S. imperialism, prevent discrimination based on sexual identity, and abolish the police. These all remain live demands of many radicals on the left. Demand six, however, is likely to strike even many of today's activists as irresponsible, bizarre, and dangerous:

Rearing children should be the common responsibility of the whole community. Any legal rights parents have over 'their' children should be dissolved and each child should be free to choose its own destiny. Free twenty-four hour child care centers should be established where faggots and lesbians can share the responsibility of child rearing.

Collective child-rearing? Legally emancipated children? Queers helping to raise other people's children and, by extension, serving as role models and moral exemplars? Isn't this exactly what conservatives fear when they warn of the red flag of liberal "social engineering," a queer version of Soviet indoctrination daycares?

Or is it a utopia that would finally liberate women from the burdens of social reproduction, while also creating a social structure in which children could safely function as independent beings who are not frightened or shamed out of exploring their sexuality?

SINCE AT LEAST the eighteenth century, there has been robust debate about the nature of childhood. While questions of whether or not children are innately good, suitable for the open labor market, or in need of standardized education have elicited polarized opinions over the centuries, most reformers have assumed, to varying degrees, a starting point of child paternalism, the idea that children need the protection of adults and, in exchange, are eligible for fewer basic rights.

The children's liberation movement of the late 1960s was a dramatic break from all of this, no matter how progressive many prior reforms may have been, because it repudiated child paternalism. Set against the backdrop of a cultural moment when adults—from hippies and radical feminists to blacks and gays—were seeking greater personal freedoms,

it was perhaps only a matter of time before young people identified themselves as (or were identified as) an oppressed minority deserving of legal equality and, in effect, manumission.

Even recalling what we know about the radical nature of the 1960s, it can be difficult to appreciate that child liberation was not a fringe idea. Paul Goodman's bestselling *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System* (1960) proposed that children were among the first casualties of capitalism run amok, while A. S. Neill's progressive education treatise of the same year, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*, proposed not only that children could function as democratic actors and make sensible social and sexual choices, but that his school had already been facilitating this for years, to no ill effect. When it appeared in English in 1962, medievalist Phillippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* caused a similar sensation, demonstrating that our modern notion of "childhood"—of a child who must be sheltered from the world—was a social construct of only recent vintage, as was the nuclear family. For much of history, Ariès showed, all except the youngest children had functioned in the world much as adults do.

Summerhill sold over 2 million copies between 1960 and 1970, and Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* sold over 100,000 copies in the first few years of publication. The political language of liberation quickly replaced theory and conjecture. During the 1970s, at least 15 mass-market books promoted ideas of children's rights and children's liberation, including David Gottlieb's *Children's Liberation* (1973) and Beatrice and Ronald Gross's *The Children's Rights Movement: Overcoming the Oppression of Young People* (1977).

These ideas took an even more radical turn when they were combined with the newly emerging discourse of Women's Liberation. Shulamith Firestone, for example, in her groundbreaking *The Dialectic*

of Sex (1970) argued that physical reproduction itself was at the core of women's oppression and called for new technologies to replace childbirth. In addition, she contended that children were an oppressed class who suffered under the regime of the patriarchal family. In her chapter "Down with Childhood," Firestone argues that the category of "childhood" and the idea of "childhood innocence" were adult male constructions invented to bolster the oppression of women, which was also the function of the nuclear family. Kate Millett went further in her 1984 essay "Beyond Politics: Children and Sexuality," contending that the oppression of children is explicitly rooted in denying them sexual knowledge: "Sex itself is presented as a crime to children. It is how adults control children, how they forbid them sexuality. This has been going on for ages and is infinitely important to adults."

Gay liberationists were inspired by Women's Liberation and many wished in their activism to engage the topics of childhood and pedagogy. However, they faced the risk of being labeled pedophiles simply for expressing theoretical interest in children; gay men at the time were still, after all, assumed by most of Middle America to be perverts. Some gay writers took a stand by simply admitting what gay people knew and most heterosexuals desperately tried to deny: there were gay kids. Confronting the myth that adult women and men "chose" homosexuality, or had been seduced into it by degenerate adults, gay liberationists told their own stories of being gay children, and theorized—along the lines of Kate Millett—that sexual repressions and lack of sexual knowledge were far more dangerous than same-sex activity for youth. In his foundational "The Gay Manifesto," published a month before the Stonewall riots, Carl Wittman wrote:

A note on the exploitation of children: kids can take care of themselves, and are sexual beings way earlier than we'd like to admit. Those of us

who began cruising in early adolescence know this, and we were doing the cruising, not being debauched by dirty old men. . . . And as for child molesting, the overwhelming amount is done by straight guys to little girls: it is not particularly a gay problem, and is caused by the frustrations resulting from anti-sex puritanism.

Simply speaking of the existence of gay children struck at the heart of much homophobia. Testaments from gay adults that they had felt queer sexual desires as kids was a new development in the public conversation about homosexuality and a bold political strategy. Indeed, the naming of the existence of gay teens and children—in the context of an emerging children’s liberation movement—had an immediate effect on political organizing. Soon after the Stonewall riots, as Gay Liberation groups spread across the country, queer youth began to organize. In *The Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York: “An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail”* (2008), Stephan L. Cohen documents at least thirty U.S.-based groups formed, and run, by LGBT youth during the decade.

More radical theorists felt that once one accepted the idea that the bourgeois family suppresses children’s sexuality, the logical next step was to demand both an end to the nuclear family and the involvement of gay men and lesbians in the raising of children. Although its ideological purity may have made it somewhat extreme, the basic idea of a political movement inserting itself into the raising of children was not a stretch at the time. Other political movements were already dealing with issues of how they conceptualized children and their place in the world. The Black Panthers, for example, began their own schools and after-school programs, and, with their free breakfast program, injected themselves into public school systems. Mainstream and radical feminists started feminist daycare centers. They also published non-sexist children’s books. The most famous included Marlo Thomas’s 1972 illustrated book and

record *Free to Be . . . You and Me*, which touted gender equality; and Charlotte Zolotow's 1972 picture book, *William's Doll*, in which a boy wants a doll to play with, much to his father's chagrin.

To insist that lesbians and gay men should be able to help raise children was a radical vision of how the traditional family might change, but its aim was not only to shape children but also to shape adults: many activists felt that only when they were able to participate in the raising of society's next generation would they fully enjoy the rights of citizenship.

But it also would be to formally acknowledge that queer adults had been raising other people's turned-out and runaway queer children for years, particular in gay ghettos such as New York's West Village and San Francisco's Castro. Queer kids who were homeless, either by choice or circumstance, tended to flock to these neighborhoods, where they would often find themselves taken in by a sympathetic adult. Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, for example, started Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) in 1970 to set up shelters in Manhattan for homeless trans youth. In the gay slang of the 1950s and '60s, an older gay man would be called "mother" if he took on the task of guiding or advising newly-out young gay men.

This dovetailed with an idea prevalent in the early 1970s of "gay family": extended, often intergenerational groups of friends who supported one another as a biological family might. Making family in community was vital—literally lifesaving—to many LGBT people at the time. The vibrancy of this idea of chosen family was evident at the end of the decade when Sister Sledge's hit "We Are Family" became an instant favorite in gay bars and often was played as the final song at LGBT community dances and Gay Pride marches. Gay family became even more urgent during the AIDS epidemic, as many biological families abandoned their sick sons and traditional care communities crumbled.

In other words, gay people had been creating and nurturing families for years—families that offered many advantages over nuclear families. But they did not want their families to be seen as second-rate any longer, and they wanted to free everyone from what they saw as a tyrannical imposition of patriarchal, bourgeois values.

GAY MEN'S LIBERATION'S DEMANDS never came to fruition, and the authors of the Ten-Point Demands often had only nascent ideas of what practically it would look like to implement their prescriptions. Similarly, some male members of New York's Gay Liberation Front started a cell called the Revolutionary Effeminists because they felt the organization was insufficiently feminist. Historian Martin Duberman, in his 2018 analysis of the LGBT rights movement *Did The Gay Movement Fail?*, writes that the Effeminists "argued that gay men should virtually place themselves in the service of women, taking on their traditional household tasks, including the raising of children, in order to foster women's rise to power." However, it seems that the Effeminists also did not get much past theory and the group soon died out.

That said, the actual practice of queer child-rearing was happening in less radical ways on the local level. Besides the example of de facto gay adoption noted above, in 1975 some gay and straight men in Boston—not connected to Gay Men's Liberation, but perhaps inspired by its demands—formed the Men's Child Care Collective. Although the group was consciously created as a gay/straight alliance, it was overwhelmingly composed of gay men. The organization met at the Bromfield Street Educational Foundation at 22 Bromfield Street in downtown Boston, where the publications *Gay Community News* and *Fag Rag* (an offshoot of Gay Men's Liberation) had their offices.

Most meetings were consciousness-raising sessions about how gay and straight men might be friends, work together, and—as a progressive men’s movement that enacted feminist ideas—help women by sharing the work of caring for children.

One concrete project they conducted was having a daycare group for women attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in Cambridge. They also volunteered daycare services at LGBT and progressive political conferences. A focus of the group was offering childcare to women who were, in various ways, marginalized or at risk. Their feminist analysis, reflecting some of the Gay Men’s Liberation demands, reflected concerns over class, economics, and race. Like many political groups, the Men’s Child Care Collective lasted only a few years until, as members moved out of Boston or became more involved in other projects, it folded.

Similar groups formed in cities across the country, including San Francisco, Santa Cruz, and New York. The aims of these groups were threefold. As feminists, the members had a commitment to easing some of women’s burden for caring for children. They were also consciously rebelling against restrictive gender roles that excluded men from being seen as caring and nurturing to children. Perhaps most important, they were determined to confront—through word and deed—the myth that gay men were child molesters.

Nonetheless, while these groups, Boston’s Men’s Child Care Collective included, were radical in their conception, they were also curiously traditional, as they tended to place gay men in the role of temporary caretakers for children of heterosexual relationships. While there were lesbians with children in the early 1970s, most of them were women who had left marriages. The idea of lesbians or gay men *together* having children who were, in some meaningful sense, their “own” did not fully emerge for at least another decade—and when it did, it often took a shape that mirrored rather than challenged the heterosexual nuclear

family. With this came the near-fetishistic prioritizing, in gay rights activism, of gay marriage over all other causes. The radical Gay Liberation aim of upending the nuclear family was replaced by a gay rights agenda that gave *renewed life* to the nuclear family by reinvesting in its symbolic and practical necessity.

By 1977 the country saw the rise of a national conservative movement that would put Ronald Reagan in the White House. It also heralded the emergence of the highly organized Moral Majority movement that injected a discourse of right-wing evangelical Protestantism into politics. Consequently, Anita Bryant's attack on a LGBT antidiscrimination bill that would have protected homosexual teachers in Miami-Dade County, Florida, was articulated in terms of protecting children. Leading a national "Save Our Children" crusade, Bryant drew on the long-standing tropes of molestation, abuse, and indoctrination that had plagued homosexuals throughout modern U.S. history.

Rather than confront these lies with facts or, better yet, the testimony of queer young people, the gay rights movement backed away from any connection to children and teens. Gay community centers were hesitant to sponsor gay youth groups. There was a chilling effect on discussions of gay men or lesbians legally adopting children. Any discussions of introducing LGBT materials into the classroom were put on hold. Over the next decades, political discussions moved from collective care of children, and extended gay families, to the privatized same-sex nuclear family of marriage equality. In the larger political context, discussions of children's liberation also vanished, replaced by talk of protecting children from sex, "dangerous" music and video cultures, and lurking predators.

The fight for marriage equality has been crucial to the success of gay rights in recent decades. It, however, is a decidedly mixed victory for those of us who recall the visionary political exuberance, and potential of radical change, of earlier days. Replacing the traditional heterosexual

family with its same-sex analogue will not necessarily eliminate any of the profoundly damaging structural problems of the institution. The strategies, and theoretical approaches, of gay liberation concerning children were complex and politically complicated. They ranged from the practical to the impossible. They were driven by earnest care for children as well as a desire to radically break from the gridlock of oppressive family structures. At heart, all of these diverse moves—from identifying the existence of gay kids, to caring for children, to destroying the legal framework that allowed parents to “own” children—were not only attempts by Gay Liberationists to remake the world, but to heal decades of wounds inflicted by society and in particular by queer people’s biological families.

In many ways this healing has, over half a century, been slowing occurring. Amazing numbers of young people are coming out earlier and earlier. Discussions of queer youth sexuality—and gender roles—are increasingly sophisticated and vibrant. In ways that Gay Liberation began to imagine in 1972, the kids are all right; they are taking care of themselves.

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From the breast pump to egg freezing, new technologies have long promised to “liberate” mothers, but the results are often uneven, freeing some women while worsening the oppression of others. *Once and Future Feminist* considers how technology offers women both advances and setbacks in the realms of sex, career, and politics. In the age of Silicon Valley, these issues are more pressing than ever, and this collection pushes readers to consider not only whether emancipatory feminism is possible today, but what it might look like.

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