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“She Did It for the Money”

That we are so prone to getting exercised about the putative unhappiness of paid surrogates might reflect our unwillingness to confront the unhappiness in our own untenable and unjust (unpaid) gestational relations. It’s an open secret that the impossible generosity demanded of gestators and mothers under capitalism is always collapsing into toxicity and blackmail because it is a trap. At least, as Roxane Dunbar-Ortiz averred in 1970, if “motherliness” is desirable at all, it is surely “desirable for everyone, not just women.”¹ But then, in a sense, wouldn’t it cease to exist? The precarization of labor under contemporary capitalism is clearly succeeding at making larger and larger swathes of the workforce work emotionally, unremittingly, and sometimes even part-unconsciously, in a gruesome caricature of generosity. But even as more and more people join the ranks of multiplatform “whores” in the new economy, the violent moral animus against doing certain things for money shows absolutely no signs of abating.

The principle subjects of Deepa Dhanraj’s coruscating film *Something Like a War*² are participants in a Bangalore-based feminist consciousness-raising group. We encounter them drawing pictures of their bodies and “dream households” on a giant piece of paper spread on the ground, in colored pencil. Subtitled for an anglophone audience, their dialogue develops a vision of emancipated feminine sexuality, of communities in which daughters “hold the reins to the house” and of social norms revolutionized by principles easily recognizable to the western viewer as those of contemporary Reproductive Justice. The group is particularly disgusted with the imperative for women in India to be generous and accommodative both when it comes to making babies *and* when submitting to procedures aimed at preventing them from making babies. Caught

between the natalist pressure coming from her in-laws on the one hand, and the anti-natalist pressure coming from the state on the other, all the while terrorized by a value system that deems women without sons (specifically) to be disposable, "what is a woman to do?" the collective angrily demands. And "what about women who can't have children? Where is their place?" Above all, the "yearning for motherhood" that women experience appears (by their own account) to be far less metaphysical than legend would have it. Under present conditions, says one woman, Gyarsi Bai, "We need children because we have no other resources. We have no wealth, no assets. So children are our wealth, our land, our only source of income. That is why the poor need children. Why else?" Says another: "If you want to, you can be a mother, [but] motherhood cannot be imposed on anyone ... [Personally,] it stuck in my throat like a bitter fruit." Sharing the care of children with one another, redistributing their respective joys and burdens, is the broad strategy the Bangalore collective defines toward overcoming the structural abuses of "generosity."

It has hitherto been common for some Reproductive Justice activists to argue that "having babies for profit is a lie"³—as, famously, did Johnnie Tillmon of the National Welfare Rights Organization in the early 1960s. The idea here is obviously to flatly contradict eugenicist class hatred by claiming that poor people (unlike rich ones) have nothing but selfless and idealistic motivations when they have kids. But this is just as obviously a lie, too. It's always been a bad strategy for that reason—even before the rise of commercial gestational surrogacy—and especially given the validity and defensibility of accounts like Gyarsi Bai's of why "the poor need children." In the Indian context, the fact that there is no welfare system in place by which families can receive an immediate "profit" per baby, only a hoped-for future dividend in income, doesn't change the fact that arguments like Tillmon's are wrong. Rather, it proves that they are wrong not just morally but factually, since they deny the existence of motivations like Gyarsi's.

It seems relevant to the politics of "stealing from the government," too, that the women in *Something Like a War* are responding—as

survivors—to the Indian government’s coercive roll-out of Norplant (a disastrous experimental contraceptive) in the 1970s. In many parts of India, as Sharmila Rudrappa has researched, cash-for-sterilization drives were followed up a couple of decades later with cash-for-babymaking. The same populations whose reproduction was “desisted” are now being enlisted in the bodily “assistance” of wealthy people’s reproduction, and in both scenarios, already-existing offspring are supposed to benefit. An Indian mother cannot be accused, as US mothers can, of seeking money through the very act of having kids (being a “welfare queen”). Yet her soul may still be weighed and found wanting if her reproductive organs pass under the clinician’s hands: “she did it for the money” must still be sanitized by virtue of “she did it for her children.”

The belief that kids must be ends in themselves and never means to an end is one that places impossible constraints on reproducers and inevitably leads (to return to the US context once more) to progressives throwing people like Nadya Suleman, a.k.a. “Octomom,” under the bus. Who was Octomom? “To summarize in the language we were all then coming to learn,” writes Mark Greif:

Nadya had leveraged her disability payments into six babies, collateralized them (as a state liability likely to pay revenues for years to come), and then quite brilliantly leveraged those six babies into eight more.⁴

It wasn’t that Greif himself would usually think this way, or that he hated Suleman, just that, “doughy as she was still from pregnancy, soft-spoken, rabbit-eyed, naively mendacious,” she was (apparently) “so easy to hate.” Altogether, it’s hard to tell whether this is the toxic “language we were all coming to learn” during the 2008 financial crash, or simply phobic language the writer has no interest in unlearning. Would single business tycoon Mitsutoki Shigeta also be said to be “pullulating” with the sixteen babies he commissioned from Thai surrogates to be his genetic heirs?⁵ No; he wasn’t parlaying the intimate labors of his body into what can still be demeaningly referred to as “handouts.”

Greif adds that “many thought [Octomom] had done it for the

money," signalling that he himself would never think that. But *why not* think that? Obviously, she did it for the money. And so what? If solidarity with a Nadya Suleman who "did it for the money" is impossible—because she fleeced the taxpayer by taking family values too far with her corporeal generosity turned monstrous—then solidarity will surely be unthinkable when it comes to commercial surrogates, gestators who not only are in it for the cash but aren't even signing up to mother the upper-middle-class babies they've made. And if Reproductive Justice is going to exclude "irresponsible decision-makers" from its constituency, then those of us who would communize reproduction will have to march under another, wilder banner. "Suleman's violation," Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz explains, consisted in this: "not only did she gain access to the infertility clinic, a space of reproductive choice never intended for her, but once there, she proceeded to make all of the 'wrong' (unruly and undisciplined) choices."⁶ She implanted all the embryos, and their implantation was unexpectedly successful. Finally—this being her failure of "generosity" toward the state—she demanded all the pay. By putting herself in the role of a consumer of infertility medicine *and* full-time "mom," she encroached on upper-middle-class women's territory and departed from the script (hardworking, under-provisioned) that forms the condition of most anti-racist feminists' support for mothers of color. Under reproductive stratification, many a woman of color is forced to be the "worst" of mothers and the "best" of nannies. Suleman, a kind of antihero, successfully gamed the system and was neither.

The disciplinary notion of the "bad mom" is obviously a problematic one; however, the theft of proletarian time *is* deleterious to the social reproduction of marginalized groups. Queer radicals like Laura Briggs or Alexis Pauline Gumbs—who ultimately vindicate and celebrate queer proletarian social reproduction—extensively document how the oppressions and constraints faced by immiserated parents can damage caring relationships and squash the joy out of life. Even so, they insist, it is crucial for the Reproductive Justice movement to forcefully articulate the idea that "good" parenting is not synonymous with unlimited-availability parenting on

the bourgeois model. Maternal love is irreducible to the (nonblack) image of the eternally present, cis-heterosexual, solicitous housewife. To pretend otherwise, as they show, is to entertain fundamentally normative if not eugenicist ideas that can only ever be used to legitimate the removal of kids from poor families and associated punishments.

An example from popular culture springs to mind: despite her intensely loving, principled, and comradely relationship with her daughter, the depiction of a sex-working, shoplifting, semi-homeless single mother in Sean Baker's *The Florida Project* (2017) prompted all too many voices to approve the expropriation of the movie's six-year-old protagonist by social services in the final scene.⁷ Or, to give another example, Assata Shakur in her autobiography describes the surprisingly widespread view that incarcerated black radicals in the 1970s should, morally speaking, abort their pregnancies rather than birth babies destined to be so proximate to "crime."⁸ Lest we forget: babies can and are beautifully mothered (thanks in part to community solidarity-surrogacy) in the absence of "stable homes," both through and around prison bars. Besides, stable homes are very often far from the utopias they are supposed to be.

To this day, the idea that inestimable ravages are wrought by maternal "absence" or "selfishness" is perhaps the most conspicuously class- and race-contingent piece of modern dogma in existence. Perceived neglect or deviance by white mothers is punished severely at the symbolic level since the stakes of its failure—white children—carry the most valuable freight; but nonwhite mothers, for their part, can practically do no right and carry the blame for every social problem even as they receive no economic incentive whatsoever to perform motherhood "better." Our collective lack of sympathy for even fleetingly "ungenerous," finite mothers—let alone those who abandon their babies in toilets—is also intriguingly species-exceptionalist: we have no problem cackling along and celebrating monumentally ungracious treatment of newborns among nonhuman species featured on *Planet Earth*. It's as though tales of the mad moms of the deep sea serve as a safety valve for human rage. Case in point: the multigendered, cunning, cannibalistic, perverse,

and opportunistic diversity of "mothering" among other animals is entertainingly portrayed by Isabella Rossellini in her *Mammas* television series. "If I were a hamster," declares Rossellini in one skit, having munched up two of the smaller babies in the litter she's just expelled from her womb, "I would not have been considered a monster but a good administrator of strengths and resources."⁹

On a related note, Maggie Nelson confides: "Harry and I sometimes joke that women should get way beyond twenty weeks—maybe even up to two days after birth—to decide if they want to keep the baby. (Joke, OK?)."¹⁰ Such proposals can seemingly only ever be a joke, even though, as Sarah Hrdy and Alison Jolly detail in their myth-busting sociobiological writing on "alloparenting," cooperation, and adaptive "disinvestment" (infanticide) in reproduction among humans, there is no such thing as a "maternal instinct." In the nonhuman realm, as Elizabeth Grosz contends, "The family has no preferred form."¹¹ We are too quick to forget how mutable our own preferences have been, historically speaking. The very name of our class of animals—Mammalia—originates, Jolly vouchsafes, "in Linnaeus's campaign for women to nurse their children at their own breasts, at a time when most of his own circle did not do so."¹²

Abolish the Family

Nowadays, the bourgeoisie tends to do its "own" breast-feeding—but what does it even mean, that word "own"? We saw earlier how the world's star surrogacy clinician's inaugural transaction constituted a mission to save a traditional marriage by founding a proper family through an incestuous arrangement in which the surrogate gave birth to her own grandchildren. It follows that, in order to implement a revolutionary critique of surrogacy, we have to interrogate its relationship with the notion of natural kinship (while criticizing that, too). Though the objects in question consist of moving parts that can't really be considered distinct, assisted reproduction's track record in human rights violations is dwarfed—by any measure—by the track record of the "natural family."

It's certainly not tenable to say that commodification of babies is the province of the "technological": in her study on pregnant straight women, Janelle Taylor found that the fetus becomes a commodity in people's minds regardless of whether the pregnancy is commercial. Certainly under capitalism, Taylor notes, "commodification is inextricably bound up with personification."¹³ The promissory reward of capitalist pregnancy is that its upshot, in Firestone's terms, is a "baby all your own to fuck up as you please."¹⁴ Formerly a collection of children, slaves, and docents, now a microfactory of debtors, the "family," frankly, already sucks—which is not to say that the mere absence of it in people's lives wouldn't in many ways be worse in the short term. ("A purely negative effort to destroy the family would simply result in starving infants."¹⁵)

For many decades, scholars of feminist history have had ample access to archives, in both art and bureaucracy, recording the kind of experiences the custom of living in private households together with naturalized relatives has generated for humanity overall. The yawning history of so-called "unassisted" bio-kin provides the statistics, poems, songs, pamphlets, and novels detailing the discomfort, coercion, molestation, abuse, humiliation, depression, battery, murder, mutilation, loneliness, blackmail, exhaustion, psychosis, gender-straitjacketing, racial programming, and embourgeoisement. The private family is the headquarters of all of these. As far as the mountain of available evidence goes, the *natural* way clearly privileges making babies in the shape of personal mascots, psychic crutches, heirs, scapegoats, and fetishes, not forgetting avatars of binary sex. The findings are pretty clear, and the basis for our widespread "irrational exuberance about babies"¹⁶ is difficult to fathom. The philosopher Nietzsche put the following explanation for it in the mouth of Zarathustra, expounding Woe: "*I want heirs,*" sayeth everything that suffereth. "*I want children, I do not want myself.*"¹⁷ Increasingly, with Friedrich Nietzsche and with Rebekah Sheldon, we have no choice but to understand this compulsion toward reproductive self-deferral as the deep, sublimated depression of a world in eco-catastrophe. As Elizabeth Freeman suggests, "kinship diagrams have no codes for wet-nursing, or visiting the sick, or tending to

the aged"¹⁸ (or, for that matter, queer people). Nevertheless, with Sheldon, we must push through to the realization that "it is not sufficient to renounce or to denounce the child."¹⁹ Following José Esteban Muñoz, we must say: "as strongly as I reject reproductive futurity, I nonetheless refuse to give up on concepts such as politics, hope, and a future that is not kid stuff."²⁰

Is a queer way of parenting possible, asks Shelley Park?²¹ Which is to say, can we parent politically, hopefully, nonreproductively—in a comradely way? Can humans collectively enact this kind of "counter-social reproduction," a mode of "social reproduction against the reproduction of the social"?²² Perhaps we have to assume that the answer is yes in order to find out. Certainly, the "techniques of dependency and renewal"²³ with which we replace kinship are going to have to be radically, relentlessly anti-natural. Care will have to come to the fore, ceasing to be the background of social life. In Helen Hester's formulation,

xenofam ≥ biofam—the idea that families hospitable to otherness and synthesized across differences match or exceed those built on genetic coincidence alone—heads in the right direction, so long as we add the explicit caveat that so-called "blood relations" can *themselves* be xenofamilial through an ongoing orientation towards practical solidarity.²⁴

After all, even bio-kin—who Donna Haraway calls "precious"²⁵ in an important qualification to her appeal to humanity to stop making them—sometimes turn out to be comrades, if we're lucky.

Bio-kin produced through surrogacy at least have the odds on their side in terms of being intensively wanted, planned, and financially pre-invested in. By the way: "It's not just the rich who use [assisted reproductive technologies]—not by any stretch."²⁶ Briggs finds that they are popular "among Turks in Germany, the middle classes of Egypt and Iran, indigenous people in the Andes, and people from all over Africa and Asia who can make it to the United Arab Emirates."²⁷ Natural kinship is itself already assisted, already a body modification technology, one that happens to militate at a structural level against queerness. In other words, as Janet

Carsten says in *After Kinship*, kinship steps in to help biology out: “Nature requires technological assistance.”²⁸ A “surro-baby” is no more or less natural(ized) than any other. All babies are the effects of a “politically assisted procreation technology.”²⁹ This is because normative parenting, or normative kinship, according to a foundational intervention by Gayle Rubin, makes bodies not only (or not even primarily) through procreation, but also through the process of gendering them male or female. This last is one of, if not perhaps *the*, most challenging aspect(s) of the horizon of queer parenting: the defeat of kinship as “a regulated system for making people look like they were born into an anatomical sex.”³⁰ The magic of naturalization is robust.

In 2015, Madeline Lane-McKinley and Marija Cetinic articulated a movement toward a world in which “the distinction between mothers and non-mothers is radically challenged,” appealing powerfully to an erotics of “radical kinship.”³¹ They are far from alone among twenty-first-century communist feminists to have called for resurrection of the goal of family abolition. There have lately been powerful calls for counter-familial institutions and communist centers of social reproduction such as an “anti-dyadic crèche” that would, by virtue of its integration with socialized health and reproductive-care providers as well as universities, meet all humans’ basic needs for the first two decades of their lives.³² Stressing the coercive function of the family in linking the working class to the state and in preparing its members for “the division and abuses of the workplace, or exclusion from it,” Jules Joanne Gleeson and Kate Doyle-Griffiths observe that “even in the ‘best’ families, free of abuse” the family is the institution tasked with producing “racially/ethnically marked identities” and expressing the organized regulatory violence known as gender.³³

Michelle O’Brien, for her part, emphasizes the significance of the fact that “queer life has flourished when people are able to find alternatives to their families for their survival” despite such survival being “sharply constrained by the gender-normative expectations built into social welfare programs and wage employment.”³⁴ Unavoidably, as she elucidates, the form is a robust one and even cherished: “It is

through the family that generations are reproduced ... and survive fluctuations in access to wage employment." But this is, O'Brien suggests, the nettle we have to grasp in "the fight for full gender liberation through the abolition and transcendence of capitalist society and the heteronormative family."

If it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, it is still perhaps easier to imagine the end of capitalism than the end of the family. In the common rhetoric of anticapitalists, that second part of O'Brien's formulation ("and the heteronormative family") tends to be selectively forgotten. It just seems too challenging. Bioconservative thinkers, who thrive even in "revolutionary" institutions and networks, still far outnumber liberationist feminists. In a talk at a 2014 Marxist conference in London, one speaker made her disapproval of the return to family-abolitionist thought on the radical left intensely clear: "We are not," she said, "about to march around with placards saying 'Abolish the Family,' *which would be crazy*."³⁵ But even if one doesn't think the slogan is crazy, one might still reasonably think—especially given the omnipresent hand-wringing nostalgia for it—hasn't the family kind of already abolished itself?³⁶ In fact, it hasn't: despite widespread reports of its epochal decline, as Sarah Brouillette pithily remarks, "this traditional family ... is not broken enough."³⁷

In her history *Family Values*, Melinda Cooper thoroughly details her thesis that the key governmental unit of capitalism really does remain the family: it's just that the key characteristic of this gestation-organizing unit is its own perpetual crisis.³⁸ Like capitalism, as social reproduction theory aims to understand, private household-based reproduction is premised on fundamental contradictions that are constantly threatening to erupt. Much remains yet to be elucidated about how and why exactly "capitalism cannot survive without the family."³⁹ The revolutionary strategy we require in answering the question of how gestational and social reproduction will be untethered from one another remains almost entirely unwritten. For the purposes of this book, "family abolition" refers to the (necessarily postcapitalist) end of the double-edged coercion whereby the babies we gestate are ours and ours alone, to guard, invest in, and prioritize.

With that in mind, I want to revisit 1970s feminist science fiction on the basis that the many aspects of their repro-utopian visions that *aren't* directly dependent on automation are invaluable suggestions of the future, too often overlooked.

In Mattapoisett, the aforementioned society from Marge Piercy's 1976 novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, care socialization doesn't preclude specialization. People of all genders are responsible for all children, but there is also Luciente, a dedicated "kid binder, meaning I mother everybody's kids."⁴⁰ As Luciente explains in their capacity as Connie's personal guide, it is not just that biological and social reproduction are now separate from one another thanks to the brooder; the point is that, thanks to that intervention, mothering has been communized. The assumption Piercy makes is that a further disaggregation of traditionally combined elements is desirable: sexual and parental aspects of social reproduction are kept at a remove from one another: "Comothers [coms] are rarely sweet friends [lovers] if we can manage. So the child will not get caught in love misunderstandings."⁴¹ Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* assumes the same thing, limiting sexuality's sphere of influence—this time temporally rather than spatially—on the planet of Gethen, where the labor of child-rearing is shared equally between all adults. Gethenians are androgynous for twenty-six days out of every twenty-eight, and manifest either one of the two available sexes just once a month, for two days at a time, in order to experience pleasure and engage in planned procreation.⁴²

Piercy and Le Guin's recipes for polymaternal radical kinship (respectively genderfluid and part-time agender) share characteristics with Firestone's nonfiction. Frustratingly, the only thing that tends to be remembered about the twenty-five-year-old "shooting star"⁴³ of New York Radical Women and Redstockings is her proposal that "childbearing ... be taken over by technology." In reality, Firestone's flawed masterpiece also imagines a host of governing principles for living spaces based on the "diffusion of the responsibility for physical welfare"—not just responsibility for the physical production of babies—"over a large number of people."⁴⁴ Having a home somewhere must automatically entail, she said, an immediate

right for every child and adult to "transfer out," the aim being to promote freedom and a generalized "weakening and severance of blood ties."⁴⁵ She conceded that someone "who undergoes a nine-month pregnancy is likely to feel that the product of all that pain and discomfort 'belongs' to her But we want to destroy this possessiveness along with its cultural reinforcements so that no one child will be a priori favored over another."⁴⁶

Firestone's utopia represents what "adoption rights advocates" abhor the most. It is what they see when they look at surrogacy, because they sympathetically inhabit (in their minds) the position of the surrogacy-worker's poor child, who witnesses his mother's pregnancy and "sale" of the resultant baby and thereby infers—horror of horrors—that he himself (for some reason it always seems to be a "he" in this rhetoric) might be put up for sale. Children undoubtedly need stable commitments. But the worst thing in the anti-surrogacy activist's world, it seems, would be for children to realize that they are *contingently* rather than *automatically* their parents' children; the products of an active choice to care, rather than a necessity borne of Nature. How might we develop, together with children, an understanding that it is not nature but love, in all its contingency, that is the real source of the stability to which all children have a right? How could we collaborate with children in the abolition of adulthood? Lane-McKinley demands that we ask this question: "How would you talk to a child about family abolition?"⁴⁷

A child, in turn, might want to talk to a gestational surrogate about the "destruction of this possessiveness." After all, we have at our disposal the cumulative testimonies of workers *straddling* the two spheres of baby-making: surro/non-surro, paid/unpaid, unitary/fragmented, maternal/nonmaternal. Those with experience of the latter category almost invariably possess experience of the former, because of industry guidelines stipulating that surrogates in most legislatures must be married and already mothers. It seems from their accounts that the prolonged separation from one's children during surrogacy work contracts is occasionally challenging and unpleasant. But ethnographers also report that some workers "find the mandatory dormitory stays quite liberating" rather than lonely

and guilt-ridden.⁴⁸ Others (including husbands) are filling in, doing childcare, gaining fresh respect for the mother's everyday toil, and building bonds with her children that could well lighten her load far into the future. The children, meanwhile, have the opportunity to observe for themselves that they were labored over, wanted, and—on top of all that—adopted. Thus the sentiment Firestone paraphrases exclusively in terms of its use as blackmail—"To think of what I went through to have you!"⁴⁹—might conceivably also be the source of a more comradely and emancipated relation between "mother" and child.

What do surrogacy veterans have to say about the two kinds of pregnancy they've known? If we scrutinize the discourses documented in the course of clinic workplace ethnographies, to see if analogizing the paid and unpaid spheres is common, we can see right away that gestational workers are in fact *highly* prone to asking, of surrogacy, "compared to what." Their reflections take the shape of (for example) pointed remarks directed at their in-laws, remembering what it was like to do what they are doing for no pay at home. Documentaries quite frequently depict surrogates who, in this way, retroactively reimagine their prior pregnancies as undervalued services. In Mumbai, Anindita Majumdar transcribes and translates "one of the surrogate mothers in my sample notes" saying that pregnant people in general deserve normal workers' privileges since, "after all, we are also doing work that involves the body."⁵⁰ Surrogates routinely make elaborate cases to their bosses for why their labors deserve better pay; sometimes taking the line that "pregnancy is different with medicine" because they have to be "more careful."⁵¹ Alternatively, the difference is altogether erased: a surrogate might tell a support group online: "I made three babies for my husband and one for the couple from China—I celebrate all four birthdays."⁵²

On occasion, a surrogate will converse with the fetus inside her body in an expressly simplified version of her native language—as a courtesy to it, because it is foreign. She might theorize surrogacy-labor as biologically more arduous than her ("own") prior pregnancies because of the IVF fetus's larger size—whether

real or imagined—which, as Daisy Deomampo explains, is a racial coding associated with whiteness which clinicians use to justify performing caesarean sections in surrogacy.⁵³ Some surrogates develop strong opinions about styles of cooking that help with surrogacy pregnancy as compared to nonsurrogacy pregnancy. These skills become a kind of craft expertise, riffing off knowledge of pregnancy itself. In sum, for many, it is a completely casual matter to draw parallels between clinical pregnancies—pregnancies they have seen generating surplus-value directly for biomedical entrepreneurs—and unpaid pregnancies that swelled the ranks of their own families (only indirectly benefiting the capitalist class). Said one interviewee: "Any fool can have a baby [*sic*—it takes a smart woman to get paid for it."⁵⁴

A "smart" surrogate is likely to be at least somewhat prepared for the range of feelings (from indifference to grief) generated by her permanent separation from the baby in the clinical context. To someone like Orna Donath, author of *Regretting Motherhood*, this is a situation that should also prompt a broader question: When and how does gestation under capitalism generate—more generally—an *absence* of bonds between infants and adults; a genuine wish, going beyond "healthy ambivalence," not to mother the infant you've borne?⁵⁵ Because, manifestly, nonsynthetic outcomes of gestational labor are *not* confined to the context where nonrelatedness is the explicitly stated aim. A sense of alienation from the baby, and even dislike or disgust, is a massively common experience.

Maggie Nelson hypothesizes that, today, the violence of partum and the disappointment of postpartum constitute an untheorizable trauma. Essentially, romanticizing childbirth is a societywide psychic necessity, because, otherwise, we would not get over it. Because of the imperative to keep reproducing the species, there is a real structural need, she says, for humans to forget and simply move on with their lives, shackled irreversibly to the other members of the now slightly less minuscule population they call home.⁵⁶ As the wracked anonymity of a BBC news article of December 2016 collecting testimonies from "Parents who regret having children" confirms, the prescribed scripts for "successful" gestators are ones that censor

regret and devastation, not only presuming but—*pace* Sara Ahmed—*demanding* happiness.⁵⁷

Under the coercion of this oppressive happiness, Lane-McKinley and Cetinic advance the claim that it is actually “postpartum depression” that more accurately “describes the social conditions of motherhood under late capitalism.” Their utopian intervention, “Theses on Postpartum,” is one that powerfully punctures the narrative—hegemonic even on the feminist left—that there could be such a thing as “worth it” or “not worth it” or “worth it in the end.” If we are going to manufacture human beings, let us aspire to something more, something immeasurable, something beyond the idea of “worth it.”

“Labor Does You”

At the Women’s March on Washington, DC, in January 2017, Janelle Monáe warned that those who “have birthed this nation ... can unbirth it if we choose.” Sigrid Vertommen, theorist of “repro-sabotage,” declared it a brilliant intervention, and it was.⁵⁸ In the name of reminding the 500,000-odd people in attendance of their power—both to deal death and to produce life—it makes sense to talk about choice. As a queer black artist, Monáe knows better than most that the conditions of possibility for this “choosing” are heavily circumscribed. Gestators’ freedom is circumscribed not only by the policy horrors we’re used to listing on our marches against Trump, but also—and more complicatedly—by the frankly less than perfect control we possess on an individual level over the work we do with our bodies. The statement “we can, if we choose,” in short, strategically exaggerates (un)birthers’ agency. And this same tendency—to exaggerate the separation between humans and the things they are doing, as well as the degree of control—is true of lots of kinds of theory. As W. B. Yeats suggested, it is maddening not to be able to “know the dancer from the dance” (a reference, I always imagine, to the terrifying predicament of the girl who can’t stop doing arabesques in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy-tale “The Red Shoes.”)⁵⁹

The flipside of this ontological anxiety, aroused by a dance and dancer being indistinguishable from one another, is the fantasy that

surrendering entirely to one's work is a deeply beautiful thing. The reality for most of us is that there isn't much to love about the fact that the labors of creation and destruction move through their subjects more or less independently of their choice—like silk through a silkworm, as Marx famously said (without necessarily knowing much about the working conditions of silkworms) in praise of an "unproductive laborer" whose work was *Paradise Lost*.⁶⁰ Whom does it serve, in the present, to figure this dissolving of the self in labor as sublime and desirable? Unsurprisingly, women, queers, and people of color have often been the ones to correct these romantic prowork moments in Marx and in culture more generally.⁶¹ They have pointed to the co-optation of this idea, notably in the neoliberal mantra that it is not only possible but morally imperative to "do what you love." In short, fighting for a world based on "fulfilment through work" is not a communist horizon, even if that goal remains beloved by some who share the commitment to abolishing capital. Laboring *shall* no doubt one day be more pleasurable than it currently is; humanity will be free. But the framing of struggle, in the meantime, remains a matter of finding ways to maximally eradicate work, not learn to enjoy it. And that, in turn, requires recognizing work for what it is—wherever it is—in the first place.⁶²

In her memoir *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson visits the idea that "You don't do labor. Labor does you."⁶³ Or, to repurpose Yeats: *How can we know the mother from the fetus, the gestator from the gestation?* Bringing this tangledness of producer and product into dialogue with Monáe's call for an unbirthers' revolution is the difficult but necessary task, I think. How does one actually exert the political "choice" to refuse, in so circumscribed and nonsovereign a situation? How do we collectively develop the prostheses, techniques, and technologies that would *give* us more meaningful forms of agency around pregnancy? How do we do politics with the understanding that politics is also, simultaneously, doing us? And finally, how do we make it reliably okay for our comrades to enter into the many, many situations where they're being *done by labor*? Because, while the truth of Nelson's striking apothegm applies first and foremost to the labor of parturition, it also describes other work forms:

in *The Argonauts*, it includes her partner's labor of self-reinvention, the labor of writing and, in a complicated way, the process of dying.

Certainly the labor of "being in labor" "demands surrender"; it "runs you over like a truck," Nelson attests. "If all goes well, the baby will make it out alive, and so will you. Nonetheless, you will have touched death along the way. You will have realized that death will do you too, without fail and without mercy."⁶⁴ Which is why, when we take up the anti-reproductive struggle invoked by Janelle Monáe in America, we have to develop assistive apparatuses that can ease the process of dying. It is why we have to face up to the fact that, as Donna Haraway says, "sometimes it's important to kill ... it can be a good thing to do."⁶⁵ Birthing and unbirthing the world are overlapping projects. "We're not idiots," agrees a pregnant Maggie Nelson in annoyance at anti-abortionists' way of addressing those considering having an abortion: "we understand the stakes. Sometimes we choose death."⁶⁶

The Argonauts describes Nelson performing pregnancy at the same time as her partner Harry remakes his sex. The title is the guiding metaphor for two parallel "gestational" processes, recalling the mythical ship the *Argo*, which remained *itself* even as, one by one, all of its parts were replaced while it sailed. In Nelson's autobiographical critical theory, birth, gestating, writing, parenting, and gender/sex transition are all asymmetrically mutual forms of holding and letting go. They are not meaningful or "worth it in the end" according to some sentimental calculus. They are labor-intensive and ambivalently gruelling, boring, and joyous. Maggie and Harry, gestator-gestatees, are simultaneously sailors and sailed vessels, fluid self-birthing and self-un-birthing subjects whose organs, muscles, and endocrinal systems move, shed, and morph.

Nelson's stress in both arenas is firmly on the collaborative character of production; the production, in this case, of selves. Gender transition is not an autonomous process one might achieve alone. The process of uterine becoming, likewise, involves a one-way partition (the placenta) yet isn't a one-way street. Thoughts to this effect are spelled out by another poet, Minnie Bruce Pratt, in the words

she performatively addresses to the fetus hidden inside herself: "the sound of your blood crossed into mine."⁶⁷ Pratt's account is scientifically accurate. "Microchimerism" is the scientific term for the cross-colonization that takes place in pregnancy, whereupon the pieces of DNA left behind by the fetus float around the adult's body for the rest of their life. (I am also reminded of the description of a pregnancy in fiction writer Samantha Hunt's story, "A Love Story": "her blood and bones were sucked from her body."⁶⁸)

Pregnancy is about "intra-action, or the mutual emergence of entities in simultaneous practises of differentiation and connection."⁶⁹ Exactly this could also describe the diffuse productivities of the person in *The Argonauts* who self-administers testosterone, transforming his voice and his very bone mass while sweating skin-permeable testosterone onto (and into) his writerly, gestating lover. Simultaneously, the body of that gender-Argonaut's "same-sex" partner is being irreversibly colonized by strange DNA in the form of living fetal cells. As such, the famous lines—*They fuck you up, your mum and dad / They may not mean to, but they do*—require revision because, biologically speaking, they also apply in the opposite direction.⁷⁰ Gestation always implicates actants far more diverse, numerous, and queer than the figures implied by the words "mum and dad."

With her titular ship's repair-and-maintenance crew, it is as though Nelson is answering Christine Battersby's complaint that "we are lacking models that explain how identity might be retained whilst impregnated with otherness, and whilst other selves are generated from within the embodied self."⁷¹ And while the metaphor of the metabolism of the mutant ship is genuinely fresh, it builds on previous descriptions of being pregnant, demonstrating immanently that authorship can only ever be coauthorship, and even including annotations or glosses on theory in the margin of the memoir. For Iris Marion Young, who, as it happens, does not appear explicitly in *The Argonauts*, pregnancy is one of the things that schools us (unpleasantly) in this communistic sensibility. "The integrity of my body is undermined ... I literally do not have a firm sense of where my body ends and the world begins."⁷²

Pregnancy occasions, in Maggie Nelson's words, at once "a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one's body."⁷³ Alienation per se is arguably not a problem—indeed, it has proven to be an appealing value to some feminists, notably the authors of a manifesto they even subtitled "A Politics for Alienation."⁷⁴ The point is: *Which* alienation? Controlled how? In anti-surrogacy feminism and ecofeminism, as Helen Hester notices, we are typically encouraged to give ourselves over to (alienate ourselves in) natural childbirth. In this view, "reproductive technology offers a disenchanting alienation, achieved via devolving epistemic authority to medical experts, whilst nature offers an (for some reason vastly preferable) enchanting alienation, achieved via the subjection of the impregnated body to forces beyond its control."⁷⁵ Like me, Nelson rejects this distinction between reproductive technology and "natural" pregnancy, and between the two alienations they represent. For Samantha Hunt, too, the point is that gestational biology is already a hostile takeover: "I'm ruled by elixirs and compounds I don't even know."⁷⁶

But it's not just that the technophobic pronatural message is troubling, given the health risks associated with pregnancy and childbirth, and the risk of death, literally, that rises in proportion to one's loss of control over a pregnancy. The message fails to grasp the bothness, the cyborgicity, the queerness of the labor experience. The productivity made possible by nature and medicine's foreign rule is, in many ways, vindicating and miraculous: "My body made eyeballs and I have no idea how," speaks Samantha Hunt's narrator. "There's nothing simple about eyeballs ... 'Queer' once meant strange ... I am extremely not simple." Meanwhile, Nelson asks:

How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolise or enact the ultimate conformity? Is this just another disqualification of anything tied too closely to the female animal from the privileged term (in this case, nonconformity, or radicality)?⁷⁷

In a way, yes: but it seems to me that we might also want to regard the politics of gestationality more broadly, in terms of the erasure

inflicted on the skillfulness of bottoms (in the sexual sense), the subjugation of that gender-distributed power we've called "circlusion."

The problem that "circlusion" corrects is essentially the overvalorization of agency in our imagining of labor-power, the excessive attachment we cultivate to our self-image as authors who exert control over their work. As we've seen, even Marxists who (in theory) know better would prefer to feel they have the upper hand over the labor process. Politically unsettling as it may be, however, it does appear that labor *does us*. Or so Nelson recalls being counselled several times during her pregnancy. This interpenetrative knot is an image of labor it would make sense to work from, as Marxists. It could serve as the model in relation to which other forms of earthly labor, when we investigate them, may or may not differ. In other words: rather than seek to shoehorn pregnancy into the falsely simple categories we have to delimit productive work, what if we faced up to the possibility that a far, far wider range of social labors than we might previously have thought is fundamentally akin to gestatedness, gestatingness, miscarriage, abortion? What if we really felt the politics of uterine work to be comparable to other labors? What strikes, riots, and occupations might we become capable of?

Notwithstanding the wildness of the labor that "does them," as things stand, waged gestators are not calling for rescue. This is remarkable, and while they don't have to command your reverence (as they do mine), it seems clear to me that they deserve the utmost respect. They are not calling for destruction of the industry that exploits their labor (at least, not in shorter order than any other industry). Ethnographies and workers' inquiries are quite unambiguous on this point—and Chapter 2 detailed how frustrating it is that RadFem exponents of Stop Surrogacy Now policy appear unable or unwilling to read them.

The familial status quo is a far more deserving target for "our" opposition. (I say "our" here, optimistically, despite being unconvinced that collaboration between revolutionary and cultural feminisms is possible.) If revolutionaries want to transform that template, they must act to secure, not policy safeguards against

Surrogacy™, but rather, incentives to practice *real* surrogacy, *more* surrogacy: more mutual aid. We need ways of counteracting the exclusivity and supremacy of “biological” parents in children’s lives; experiments in communizing family-support infrastructures; lifestyles that discourage competitiveness and multiply nongenetic investments in the well-being of generations.

Limits on Generosity

In a laudable challenge to (academic) neglect of (low-income non-white maternal) neglect, Rhacel Parreñas has documented a “care deficit” in the Philippines. This alleged crisis of care stems from the fact that so many Filipina mothers are located outside the country, far away, looking after other people’s children in the Global North.⁷⁸ Asked whether they would ever leave their own future children with other family members in order to travel abroad, as their mothers had left them, Parreñas found that most daughters said they would not. Yet Briggs questions whether we can extrapolate a completely straightforward narrative of “tragedy” from this data, suggesting that more often than not, low-income transnationally dispersed families really are doing all right when they say there are doing all right (which they mostly do say, at least in Parreñas’s study). Highlighted by Briggs, for instance, are the ways such families take for granted a wider range of “alternative” caring intimacies that are often based on a looser gender division of labor than that of the traditional bourgeois nucleus.⁷⁹ She proposes that we give credence to the children’s professed appreciation of their mother’s migration-based sacrifice, and their judgment, when proffered unprompted, that they are okay. To talk of a “care deficit” with “devastating ... life-long” impact on kids is to risk reiterating, Briggs thinks, a conservative ideology about where care—exclusively—comes from, underestimating the success and tenacity of proletarian forms of care-surrogacy. Mothers who work abroad do not in and of themselves a care catastrophe make.

Nor are mothers generally unbounded in their generosity, even if that seems to be the only social basis for praising them. Such praise is

a form of policing. When the Thailand-Australia surrogacy scandal known as "Baby Gammy" broke in 2014, the person unwillingly cast as the "Mother Courage" in the story was the surrogate-turned-adoptive-parent, an employee of Thailand-Surrogacy Ltd, called Pattharamon Chanbua.⁸⁰ The multiple embryo transfer she had undergone had resulted (as is common) in the implantation of twins. Late in the contract pregnancy, the clinic apprised the Australian commissioning parents of the male fetus's trisomy 21, whereupon they sought a partial refund, requesting that it be aborted. However, the surrogate, Pattharamon, refused this option. After the birth, and a highly dramatic tussle, Pipah (the other twin) was brought to Australia, and Gammy stayed. He is now a kid with Down syndrome living—in contravention of the most fundamental rules of Surrogacy™—with Pattharamon's Thai extended family.

While the dominant narrative around all this involved Pattharamon "instinctively" coming to the rescue of an abandoned fair-skinned infant whom she'd borne in her womb, and featured a lot of horrified castigation of the heterosexual buyers for their behavior (especially, and rightly so, when it came out that one of them, Mr. Farnell, had a conviction for child abuse), in my opinion what Pattharamon actually said and did, while generous, was much more interesting than that. In adopting Gammy, Pattharamon acted on behalf of a collective and was very clear about placing limits on her generosity. She adopted Gammy, not automatically or out of "instinct," but on the seemingly pragmatic, self-respecting, and comradely basis that the household she belonged to outside Bangkok would be the better place for him, given the ableism and hostility of the baby's Australia-based genetic parents. When interviewed on TV, her main message was directed not at the gawking public but to other impoverished people in Thailand, especially feminized service- and sex-industry workers and potential surrogate recruits. Pattharamon articulated a warning about predatory, proprietary wannabe-parents and an appeal to the necessity for mutual aid: we have to help ourselves, she said; "no one will help us."

Pattharamon Chanbua is, as I have argued elsewhere,⁸¹ an example of a structurally queer parent and recalcitrant surrogate who quietly

transcended Surrogacy™, causing sufficient bioconservative alarm that surrogacy was banned in Thailand shortly thereafter. On the other hand, some of the most reactionary upholders of normative ideas about maternal sacrifice are to be found among the surrogacy industry's "labor aristocracy"—US-based gestational freelancers. I've already mentioned the existence of an extreme version of generosity even unto death—giving "the gift of life" as a calling in life—which goes all the way back to antiquity. Much ancient Greek thought imagined a primal sex-dyad, "man" and "woman," as being endowed with a special mission for each involving bloody valor: childbirth and war respectively. Risking death in birth-labor and risking death on the battlefield were the twinned fundamentals of civic virtue, each in its own way critical to building and defending the polis. Although it enjoys popularity among anti-black fascists and briefly structured 1970s and '80s Black Nationalist opposition to abortion, this image of the two duties of national honor being a conjugal labor dichotomy had largely disappeared as an overt referent in modern societies. The Reproductive Justice scholar Jennifer Nelson discards it actively when she states: "an act of valor for a woman need not take place inside of her."⁸²

However, with the rise of commercial gestational surrogacy, it seems to be making an interesting comeback. In a context of twenty-first-century US wars of invasion and occupation, troop deployment "overseas" and attendant revivification of pronatalist, imperialist sentiment on the domestic front, something like this discourse accompanies the surge of commercial surrogacy work among communities of spouses of US Army personnel, commonly known as "military wives." As Elizabeth Ziff explains: "when [infertility] agencies first began targeting military spouses as surrogates, military healthcare (TriCare) covered surrogate pregnancies, which ultimately lowered the cost of surrogacy for the intended parents."⁸³ Being subject to intense demands around "morale" and participation on the part of the army, this population of voluntaristic recruits is one that defines itself by its culture of sacrifice, valor, emotional strength, discipline, accountability, and, above all, endless waiting. Having conducted over thirty interviews, Ziff reports: "for this group of surrogates,

the common notion of 'military first' becomes 'surrogacy first' and the specific military experience of deployment is easily transposed onto the surrogate experience."

It gets worse. In a different, broader study of the predominantly North American forum SurroMoms Online, it was found that participants "uphold the nuclear family as the building block of society"⁸⁴ with a ferocity unequalled anywhere else. Predictably enough, discursive norms on SurroMoms Online are shaped significantly in reaction to hegemonic formations of whorephobia and moral reproach (as described in the context of anti-Octomom sentiment); yet this does not fully excuse the strategy of the response. Instead of defending themselves as workers with rights and power, upper-middle-class surrogates are doubling down on the ideology of maternal generosity and going the "respectability" route in deeply anti-communist fashion. Far from agreeing with Claudia Card that "we need to pluralize the term 'biological mother,'"⁸⁵ SurroMoms naturalize the cult of the one mother, the "real" mother, whose possession of her baby is total. If we take a step back, it should strike us as particularly strange that a surrogate-worker-support forum would collude in this anti-polymaternal ideology. As "full spectrum" doulas never tire of advocating, we produce lots of things through our wombs that aren't living babies, yet weave worlds. But such truths—the truths of collective parenting, collective mourning, and full-spectrum reproductive autonomy—are precisely the ones that one cannot make money off, perhaps inherently so, but certainly at present.

Clearly the SurroMoms' hireability as workers—"fetus sitters,"⁸⁶ they sometimes say—depends on their reliability as nurturing angels who would never harm or covet a fetus. It isn't exactly hard to understand why, if SurroMoms Online is head-hunted by clinicians and intended parents, that participants are elaborately constructing an image for themselves as accommodating helpmeets who *devoutly* respect the property rights of parents named in the contract and would never "steal." An online "surromom" in California will typically receive a lot of praise and agreement on the forum for posting a statement like "This baby is not mine." One SurroMoms Online-er who is bearing twins posts: "These are not my babies to give away!

They aren't mine!" Another writes: "I am offering the risk of my LIFE for people to have a child. That is the gift I offer."⁸⁷

It's hard to know how representative of freelance surrogates these hundreds of thousands of competitive assertions of self-sacrifice on SurroMoms Online really are; how much of what is on display is a "front" belying something queerer. One can easily find examples of support among surromoms around conflictual negotiations with intended parents—so it's not exclusively a sea of disciplinary chiding. But willfully happy-striving and cultlike conformity does seem to be the name of the game on SurroMoms Online, as when for instance shame is poured on one "Surro" who shared with the forum her desire not to have her intended parents present at the birth itself (girl, "it's still their pregnancy").⁸⁸ Surromoms, it seems, *do* define what they do as work, but they do so precisely in order to perform surrender to it. Given the prevalence of Christian piety on the forum, it makes sense that the other major literature in which refusing abortion is theorized as a duty and a commitment for pregnant people, namely the field of "pro-life," also frequently speaks of the "work of pregnancy" in terms of embracing holiness as work, and work as holy: "creating with God."⁸⁹

The heated response that is still elicited whenever a book on maternal regret, such as Donath's, comes out—or even one on mere maternal ambivalence such as Sarah LaChance Adams's—is proof enough of these scholars' central thesis: that testimonies of unrepentantly unwilling mothers retain a persistently sacrilegious character and that there is next to no tolerance in society for discourses that denaturalize the law of maternal generosity or seek ways to support mothers who want out. Even words like Mai'a Williams's from the introduction of the anthology *Revolutionary Mothering* are enough to offend some readers: "Birth is smelly bloody dirty messy bestial ... It isn't sweet. It isn't romantic ... life itself broke you apart, shattered you and made you the earth that made your kid possible ... for better or for worse."⁹⁰ And very often it really is "for worse." Of the infamous deserters of white bourgeois mid-century motherhood, perhaps the least reproached are the suicides, like Sylvia Plath. Here is her account of parturition resulting in no redemption, no rush of euphoria, no consolation:

I felt this black force blotting out my brain and utterly possessing me. A horrible fear it would split me and burst through me, leaving me in bloody shreds, but I could not help myself, it was too big for me ... I had nothing to do with it. It controlled me ... A great wall of water seemed to come with it ... The afterbirth flew out into a Pyrex bowl, which crimsoned with blood ... We had a son. I felt no surge of love. I wasn't sure I liked him.⁹¹

Or think of the suicide-by-abortion captured in Richard Yates's novel *Revolutionary Road*.⁹² Or the way Eva Khatchadourian experiences motherhood in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. That narrative (a successful movie, originally a novel by Lionel Shriver) made waves by raising the important point that—regardless of your provision of “unconditional love” and tireless generosity—your kid might be sociopathic, reactionary, and cruel, just like anybody else.⁹³ If your horrible pregnancy doesn't abort itself, if your horrible kid doesn't kill himself (as is the case, traumatically, in *Kevin*), can it really be that, as a mother, you are expected to endure more than a decade of your life in a household with no “immediate right,” recalling Firestone, to “transfer out”?

There's a reason, remarks Laura Briggs, why

Adrienne Rich opened her classic feminist text on mothering *Of Woman Born* with a story of a woman slitting the throats of her three children on her suburban front lawn and the terrified, whispered acknowledgment of the mothers Rich knew that they all had had days when they felt like doing something similar.⁹⁴

Ann Lamott tells us twenty-five years later that “a friend” of hers “looks at her child and thinks: I gave you life. So if I kill you, it's a wash.”⁹⁵ The life-giver's right to kill is a surprisingly common formula; for instance, it appears in the New Jersey surrogacy tele-drama *Baby M* when Mary Beth Whitehead is fleeing the police with the rich couple's baby: “I gave her life! I can take her life away!”⁹⁶ But this brings us to the standpoint-specificity of necropower's positive potential. When Mary Beth utters this formula, it is nothing more than a melodramatic proprietarian threat. It is not motivated

either by hatred, a need to be free of the baby, or by *comradeliness toward it*, as can also be the case—albeit in infinitely worse human predicaments, such as that famously explored by Octavia Butler in *Kindred*⁹⁷ or Toni Morrison in *Beloved*.⁹⁸

The sense that “unbirthing the nation” and unmaking babies would overall constitute a good thing is a perspective that belongs—not exclusively but specifically—to the Movement Mothers marching in Washington, DC, because their children have been murdered by the police. Or, as Barbara Bush shows, while taking pains not to romanticize infanticide, it might be something slaves in the British Caribbean decided upon: to take life away again from those they had birthed under slavery because *that* was the generous thing to do.⁹⁹ While it is a perspective echoed elsewhere,¹⁰⁰ it is nevertheless deeply disappointing to me that Rich could write the following: “[gestation under capitalism] is exploited labor in a form even more devastating than that of the enslaved industrial worker who has, at least, no psychic or physical bond with the sweated product, or with the bosses who control her.”¹⁰¹ Rich here manages to unfavorably compare the lot of racially unmarked “mothers” such as herself to that of historic slaves (who may or may not be pregnant, though Rich does not seem to have considered this). She completely flattens the racially stratified context in which the “validity” of necropolitical actions (such as baby-killing) is necessarily determined.

Rich’s theorizing, like that of Maria Mies and Ariel Salleh and countless others, runs on nostalgia for a putative *unalienated* child-birth of which women of all classes and races have been robbed. And while radical and ecofeminism often stands accused of “biologism,” ironically, biologism—that is, better acquaintance with the bare biology of human gestation—is more than capable of putting an end to that fantasy.

Staying with the Violence

A Tamil-language newsclip aired in early 2014 by a small broadcaster, RedPix 24x7, reported on the urgent need for free legal aid for surrogacy workers in Tamil Nadu and the problem of predatory

middlemen. In conclusion, it proclaimed: "Pregnancy is a dangerous business."¹⁰² It is rare to find theoretical biologists who not only agree with this but possess good public-facing communication skills, but one such person—affiliated with Monash and Leuven universities—stands out. In literal contradiction of prevailing cultural idealizations of maternal generosity as boundless, Suzanne Sadedin explains in her interventions at *Aeon* and *Quora* that "the mother is a despot: she provides only what she chooses."¹⁰³ (I'm not at all sure, admittedly, that the one thing follows from the other.) Sadedin's point, put another way, is that our maternal anatomy is perpetually defending itself, *decreasing* sugar and blood pressure in response to the fetus signalling for more. Human gestators are technically "less generous" in this sense than are most nonhumans; they have to be, because human fetuses, "tunnelling towards the mother's bloodstream," fight and override every "no" they encounter. They disable our immune system with floods of cortisol and constrict our blood vessels (if necessary) with the help of toxins, causing kidney or liver damage and stroke. In short, the unborn routinely deploy all manner of "manipulation, blackmail and violence" in their contribution to being made.

Seen through the gynophobic eyes of certain authors of medical textbooks, Sadedin's language unfortunately does resonate with woman-punishing suspicions propagated by influential doctors in the 1950s and 1960s about the inconvenience for babies of having to exist inside the hostile environment of the womb, where they are "attacked." Fascinatingly, it also resonates with the most deeply conflicted, not to say schizoid, elements of self-styled "biological" feminism. It has been—at least in England—self-designating "Radical Feminists" vehemently opposed to transgender rights (such as Fair Play For Women) who have gleefully shared Sadedin's piece on social media in the context of news stories concerning uterus transplants for trans women.¹⁰⁴ The erroneous idea here—which completely misreads Sadedin—seems to be that those already equipped with uteruses (i.e., "real women," according to transphobes) are naturally able to cope with the "1,000 cancers" gestation unleashes on the human organism, whereas the recipient of a donor uterus, for some reason, is not.¹⁰⁵ By and large, this lobby-group's antipathy to all

technological assistance in the obstetric domain makes it clear that the everlasting persistence of pregnancy's injury and mortality rate would be a price anti-trans feminists are willing to pay for the satisfaction of excluding trans women from the health care system and the legal sphere of womanhood. While patriarchal scientists have sought, and still seek, to extract pregnancy from the brutal terrain of the uterus, in short, it is for similarly misogynist reasons that certain feminists hug that violence tightly to themselves.

But even beyond these twinned poles, it is a problem that Sadedin relies upon some of the same metaphors of violent overwhelming, combat, competition, and male-female antagonism that were so popular in the mainstream stories about sexual reproduction famously analyzed by Emily Martin (inaugurating a whole field of study on the politics of fetal representation).¹⁰⁶ In the mid-twentieth-century scientific and medical canons parsed in *The Woman in the Body*, Martin found that the fetus appears as a jolly little soldier, a bumptious intruder, and a cute emissary of the binary "otherness" of the father's genetic difference, lost in the mean enemy territory of the mother's body. Fetal violence toward maternal anatomy was wholly naturalized in these casually sexist texts, and maternal-fetal antagonism was also never imagined as a relationship *internal* to the laboring maternal body (on the contrary, as so many scholars have shown: "the lady vanishes").

All these tropes have been instrumental in stabilizing the pernicious notions of fetus-as-subject so beloved of "pro-life" movements and weaponized in their attacks on reproductive rights. Worryingly, such notions also visibly live on in the minds of some brokers in Surrogacy™, with the twist that consumers of any gender can now be positioned where the malevolent male "father" used to be in the obstetric (not to mention RadFem) imaginary; while the laborer whose labor power is circulating becomes more and more like an invitingly empty space—"only a uterus," as one clinician put it.¹⁰⁷ So, despite other changes, the gestational body in representation stays more or less where she was, her "generosity" only growing more and more perfect as the various discourses around assisted reproduction are competitively refined. On the one hand, there is the disconcerting

hypergenerosity of the "military wife" surrogate, shouting "surrogacy is worth sacrificing for."¹⁰⁸ On the other, as two exceedingly genteel commissioning parents from Oxfordshire suggested—referring to the Indian woman engaged in gestating their gametes 7,000 km away, whose name they didn't even know—there is the perspective that goes beyond sacrifice to pure object-instrumentality: "she is only the vessel."¹⁰⁹

But it is to miss the point to infer from Sadedin's startling story that getting into gestating willingly is so irrational as to be "bad," or that fetuses are to be blamed, or that human gestators aren't *extraordinarily* "corporeally generous" despite (or perhaps because of) the limits they place on that generosity. This is not an undialectical "anti-pregnancy" intervention: it is an argument for amplifying, rather than simply staying with, the trouble. Staying with the violence of gestating, rather than excluding it from our affections, is necessary not because the violence is somehow natural but precisely because it need not be. It observes that when we have gestated, we have been at pains to place acceptable limits on our own colonization; forced to work absurdly hard to stop a beneficiary of our labor from taking more than we are willing to give, the argument suggests that that is both similar to labor relations everywhere, and less than okay.

The rise of surrogacy notwithstanding, even upper-class white females continue to do gestation and to experience it as depressing and perilous. "How did we humans get so unlucky?" might be the pivotal evolutionary question for Sadedin. But "what do we do about this violence, and how can we *help* one another?"—is the other question it yields for a (gender-, race-, and class-abolitionist) repro-utopian politics. The anti-romantic understanding of pregnancy need not erase what's "positive" about it. At the same time it has the potential to sharpen our understanding of the knottedness and contradictoriness of social reproduction and of the fact that we can't put off tackling this complexity until "after the revolution."

What is key for me is that Sadedin's insights can be framed as a demand for solidarity with gestators—a call for the very unalienated childbirth some feminists think we would already have if only technodocs got "off our backs." In refuting *them*, I don't just mean

that the products of gestational labor are intimate aliens confronting their makers; I mean that the process itself is necessarily going to estrange the laboring body in every society except a society where that labor's independent existence is wrestled into *maximal* gestator control. There's no cause to be phobic or reactionary about the ways in which "labor does you," or to pursue the mirage of perfect control and autonomy. The debilitating invasion of the produced, during gestation, might after all have an ecstatic, masochistic rush to it. But while consent is always an ideal rather than a reality, in any intimate session based on domination and submission the set-up has to be carefully rigged for the purposes of striving toward that ideal. To achieve something like unalienated gestation, an environment that has secured "free abortion on demand without apology" would be a start, but isn't in itself good enough; the services of abortion and birth ("full spectrum") doulas, biohackers, and gynecopunks should be a universal given, as should be research into ways to prevent things like *placenta accreta* (where the placenta grows attached to the body). While all hitherto existing societies have probably only known alienated gestating—even celebrating that disempowerment—biology is quite literally not destiny. As Vicki Kirby speculates, it was culture all along.¹¹⁰

How do we mold an *is* out of an *ought* we have largely yet to imagine with regard to gestational nature/culture? That is to say: How do we remake pregnancy according to principles that may themselves be as-yet-unthinkable? I've suggested in this chapter that we start by grasping how morbidity is part of the mutuality of life's work. I've explored the agonism of gestation as it plays out at the molecular level and is concretized, in turn, by social forms that could conceivably be transformed. What remains to be said is that, if insisting on gestator-fetus agonism leads to a certain degree of subjectification of the fetus (be it as a heroic or parasitic figure), then the challenge to which we must rise involves affirming a politics that has a place for the killing of subjects—a politics of abortion that resists "preemptive compromise"¹¹¹ on the question of what it is exactly gestators sometimes kill. In the absence of such a discursive step, there can be neither gestational strike nor gestational riot.