

Cyborg uterine geography: Complicating ‘care’ and social reproduction

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Abstract

Most geographers have sided with ‘cyborgs’ (technonatural subjects) against ‘goddesses’ (e.g. Mother Earth) on questions of embodiment. In itself this provides no justification for the relative dearth (in geography) of theorizing ‘with’ the uterus as a site of doing and undoing; what I propose to call uterine geography. ‘Uterine’ relations are fundamentally cyborg, animatedly labouring and not only spatial but spatializing: they make and unmake places, borders, kin. This includes not only abortion, miscarriage, menstruation and pregnancy (whose transcorporeal and chimeric character is well documented in medical anthropology) but also other life-enabling forms of holding and letting go that do not involve anatomical uteri (such as trans-mothering and other alter-familial practices). Despite our discipline’s ostensible interest in co-production, hybridity and the more-than-human, the ‘doing’ aspects of intra and interuterine processes have tended to be black-boxed in accounts of care economies and social reproduction. The proposed remedy is deromanticization: an approach that critically politicizes uterine relations as historically contingent and subject to amelioration through struggle. Potential aides include Maggie Nelson’s idea that ‘labor does you’, Suzanne Sadedin’s account of gestation’s mutual hostility and the concepts of ‘sym-poiesis’ and ‘metramorphosis’. One notable consequence of this expanded concept of the uterine is that ‘assisted reproduction’, as it is characterized today, ceases to be categorically separate from other kinds of reproduction.

Keywords

gestation, maternal, matrixial, reproductive technology, reproduction, sym-poiesis, staying with the trouble, transcorporeal, trans reproductive justice, uterus

Cyborg gestation

In determining how best to conceptualize the chimeric character of human, or rather, ‘more-than-human’ embodiment, many geographers have intuitively opted for the impure, partial agent Donna Haraway (1989) called ‘cyborg’, over the powerful and pure mother-goddess archetype of ecofeminism (namely, Kirsch, 2014; Lorimer, 2011; Schuurman,

2002; Whatmore, 2006; Wilson, 2009). ‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’ – the immortal closing lines of the Cyborg Manifesto – had, after

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all, not only articulated but resolved this choice (Haraway, 1989). It is in the critical field of geography that the notion of a monstrous, hybrid, ‘cyborg urbanization’ has principally been elaborated (Gandy, 2005; Swyngedouw, 1996). Yet, in ways also inspired by Haraway – whose latest work appeals to a litany of Indigenous mother-goddesses such as Tangaroa, Naga and Pachamama (Haraway, 2016: 101) – feminist geographers have also found room for ‘goddess’-inspired ecologies as part of the broader assault on modernity’s nature/culture binary or else rejected the cyborg/goddess dichotomy in the first place (Gergan, 2015; Jacobs and Nash, 2003; Nesmith and Radcliffe, 1993; Sundberg, 2014). But for those of us unnerved by what appears to be at best a latent rehabilitation of eugenic and populationist thought in multispecies feminism (‘make kin not babies’; Haraway, 2016), the figure of the cyborg is likely to remain an eminently preferable heuristic to the ‘goddess’ – precisely because of its potential for deromanticizing the politics of mothering, care and reproduction, where it is usually not the one (of the two) to be deployed. Neither pro- nor anti-natalist, neither pro- nor anti-maternal, the cyborg was and remains an account of a historically specific proletarian labourer, an anti-racist feminist subjectivity that is hybrid: network-situated yet antagonistic vis-à-vis capitalism, colonized yet complicit, more-than-human yet corporeal and avowedly ‘non-innocent’ (Haraway, 1989). In misrecognized surrogate ways, the cyborg labours. She (not necessarily a ‘she’) makes and unmakes babies, identities, cities. Cyborgicity is thus far more conducive to spatial–historic thinking than any vitalist, pro-maternal figuration of the human animal as tragically divorced from (yet innately reconcilable to) the web of life. Moreover, as this article argues, it is far more conducive to thinking *uterine* labour and *uterine* labour geographies, specifically, in an anti-capitalist way.

While the monopolizing of womb-related matters by various either pro- or anti-natal mythologies suggests an explanation for the relative dearth in feminist geography of theorizing *with* the uterus as a site of doing – what I propose to call uterine geography – it does not really provide an excuse. Myra Hird is right, I think, to identify wariness of

biological determinism as the reason why feminists in this field have ‘tend[ed] not to study pregnancy, birthing and breastfeeding as material processes’ (Hird, 2007: 3). Hird herself has ventured to describe these material processes anew – and many others along the way – in terms of ‘gifting’ and ‘corporeal generosity’: ‘the literal and metaphoric giving of our selves’ including dust, DNA, viruses, white and red blood, myriad other cells and bacteria (Hird, 2007: 14). The intervention in question is highly instructive but, in my reading, nevertheless persists in sweetening the account of uterine relationality somewhat – implying that the gifting is more or less symmetric, while leaving out moments of refusing, devouring and killing that, as will see, also characterize this deeply intimate bedrock of interpersonal care.

It was non-fiction literature that first elicited in me the desire for an unromantic, or cyborg, uterine geography. In her memoir *The Argonauts* (2015), Maggie Nelson describes the endpoint of her own uterine labour as an event that ‘runs you over like a truck’ (Nelson, 2015: 134). She recalls receiving sobering advice during her pregnancy: ‘*You don’t do labor. Labor does you*’ (Nelson, 2015: 134) (Emphasis is added). Reading this passage, it struck me that a long line of anti-work thinkers, from the Wages for Housework Committee onwards, have described all alienated labour – particularly the work of love under capitalism – in this way. Notably, in the eyes of the militants who sought to pit wages against housework, ‘every miscarriage is a workplace accident’ (Federici, 1975). What kind of workplace are talking about? Nelson continues:

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. (Nelson, 2015: 134)

In *The Argonauts*, there are two survivors of pregnancy, and one – cyborg – subject. If the work of pregnancy is desired by its bearer, the impossible job of the cervix becomes, first, to stay shut and thereafter, as Nelson reflects (since her delivery was vaginal) to ‘go to pieces’. The moment of

parturition, this subject tells, ‘demands surrender’ and brings you psychically to your knees. Extrapolating from this encounter with death, Nelson suggests there is a social necessity for humans to *forget* gestation. She notes, by way of evidence, that hegemonic narratives about pregnancy tend to subsume any and all suffering (the individual’s heroic means) under ends (the baby). As the wracked anonymity of a British news article of December 2016 confirms – collecting testimonies from ‘Parents who regret having children’ (BBC, 2016) – most morally prescribed scripts gloss over post-partum trauma and not only presume but *demand* happiness (Ahmed, 2010). In Nelson’s memoir, death, birth, parenting and gender transition are each described in terms of asymmetric but mutual forms of holding and letting go. I attempt to stay with this insight in what follows.

Theoretic treatments of uterine (non-)productivity as collective and political are overwhelmingly initiated in subjects like English (Handlarski, 2010), history (Murphy, 2012) and cultural studies (Tyler in Ahmed and Stacey, 2001). Feminist science scholars, too, have emphasized the two-way, microchimeric character of gestation and its aftermath (Hird, 2007; Martin, 2010; Kelly, 2012; Vora, 2015): the co-production of gestators by fetuses at the genetic and epigenetic level. These microchimerism researchers position gestation as a model of universal identity plasticity, permeability and often unwelcome fusion. They insist that, through pregnancy, maternal anatomy becomes a chimera, having been permanently infiltrated by fetal DNA. And, as these theorizations suggest, it is not simply a baby that is birthed during a birth, but rather, two unequal beings who are both survivors of their own matrixial sym-poiesis. Desiring that this preoccupation be elaborated in geography, my starting point is the contention that ‘uterine’ relations are fundamentally cyborg, animatedly labouring and collectively spatial. This includes not only abortion, miscarriage, menstruation and pregnancy (whose transcorporeal and chimeric character is well documented in medical anthropology, namely Alaimo, 2010; Hird, 2007; Kelly, 2012; Martin, 2010; Vora, 2015) but also other life-enabling forms of holding and letting go that do not involve anatomical uteri,

such as trans mothering, end-of-life care, adoption, foster care and other practices that provide for births, better deaths or survival.

In my opinion, despite our discipline’s ostensible interest in co-production, hybridity and the more-than-human, the relational animacy of these processes has often been black-boxed in accounts of ‘care’ and social reproduction. The remedy, I believe, begins with deromanticization: an approach that critically politicizes uterine relations as historically contingent and subject to amelioration through struggle. If ‘care’ and ‘social reproduction’ are the (newly re-popularized) words we have at our disposal to describe this business of (re)making and of being made, then they require thoroughgoing deromanticizing in our discipline. Some materials of interest to this end include the following variations on the idea that ‘labor does you’ back, consisting of a weave of holding and letting go that moves us through each other’s bodies: the molecular biologist Suzanne Sadedin’s account of gestation’s mutual violence (Sadedin, 2014); the concept ‘sym-poiesis’ (i.e. making-with; Haraway, 2016); and ‘copoiesis’ (i.e. making-together; Ettinger, 2006), also referred to as ‘metamorphosis’.

A shared consequence of these various relocations of uterine matters beyond the borders of ‘womanhood’ is that ‘assisted reproduction’, as it is characterized today, ceases to be categorically separate from any other kinds of reproduction. All reproduction reveals itself as, in a sense, ‘surrogate’. Given Haraway’s predilection for making precisely this point, and notwithstanding her commentary, which I will revisit, on the artist Patricia Piccinini’s sculptures of transspecies gestator-Surrogates (Haraway, 2011a), it surprises me that the author of *The Cyborg Manifesto* has never directed her acumen substantively towards gestation per se (except, lately, to recommend that her readers don’t do it in *Staying with The Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*) but colluded in the tendency to leave the nitty-gritty of gestating-ness out of discussions of care and social reproduction. In Haraway’s accounts of earthly life, eating one another and being eaten is simultaneously an inescapable reality and a conscious art to cultivate *responsibly* (response-ably) (Haraway, 2011b, 2016). But

gestation – human or non-human – is never spotlighted as an example of this. Perhaps relatedly, the ‘companion species’ turn in Haraway’s theorizing has correlated with a diminution in the grappling with exploitation, asymmetry, oppression and inequality that characterized the 1980s Manifesto. Regardless, her eye for ‘sympoiesis’ and ‘symbiogenesis’ (‘becoming-with’) is what I am proposing is part of what I think is missing from geographies of mothering and childhood. Finitude is not scarcity, Haraway suggests; eating one another need not imply competitive individualism; and saying ‘no’ (killing, even) is not necessarily cruel (Haraway, 2011b, 2016). As mentioned, however, I have concerns about Haraway’s new turn to populationist anti-natalism. Meanwhile, though an alternative name might be ‘matrixial’ geography, following the philosopher Bracha Ettinger (from ‘matrix’, meaning ‘a place or medium in which something is originated’), this comes from psycho- and schizoanalysis and is beyond my power to justify transposing into geography. I lean, therefore, towards calling my intervention ‘cyborg uterine geography’.

The agonism of gestation

The theoretical biologist Suzanne Sadedin is adamant that normal human gestation is a site of considerable, species-exceptional violence. Unlike almost all other animals, humans die because of their pregnancies every year in their hundreds of thousands, making a mockery of UN millennium goals to stop the carnage. Many survivors of pregnancy suffer a range of health problems including hyperemesis gravidarum, gestational diabetes and cholestasis. Unless aggressively contained, human placental cells ‘rampage’ through every tissue they touch, the genes that are active in embryonic development are also implicated in cancer. But this is not the only reason that pregnancy among *Homo sapiens* has evolved – in her account – to be a perpetual biological ‘bloodbath’. It is the specific, rare type of placenta we have to work with (*hemochorial* placenta) which ensures that fetuses truly dominate the process. Rather than simply interfacing through a filter or contenting itself with freely proffered

secretions, this placenta ‘digests’ its way into its host’s arteries, securing full access to her tissues. ‘Mammals whose placentae *don’t* breach the walls of the womb [in this way] can simply abort or reabsorb unwanted fetuses at any stage of pregnancy’, Sadedin notes (Emphasis is added). For them, ‘life goes on almost as normal during pregnancy’ (Sadedin, 2014). Conversely, a human cannot rip away a placenta (because they’ve changed their mind or, say, found themselves in a drought or war zone) without risk of fatal haemorrhage. The embryo has hugely enlarged and paralyzed her arterial system while at the same time elevating (hormonally) blood pressure and sugar supply.

Although feminist forms of lay science, health-care activism and medical anthropology have parsed pregnancy ambivalently for many decades (Murphy, 2012), Sadedin’s denaturalization of these ‘biological’ realities is still capable of generating a strange dissonance in vis-à-vis the affects of uncritical celebration associated – hegemonically – with childbearing. It unsettles vestigial habits of unthinking acceptance and vague adulation of gestating, whose sheer necessity every thinkable politics seems to take for granted but never seeks to explicitly organize. Sadedin’s is not a somehow ‘anti-pregnancy’ intervention. True, in her account, when we gestate, we are battling to place acceptable limits on our own colonization, forced to work absurdly hard to stop a fetus from taking more than we are willing to give. But placed within a framework within which the exceptionalism surrounding pregnancy is reversed, this understanding might sharpen our understanding of the concrete contradictions we have to navigate on every walk of life as we struggle to build something better than capitalism. On the left, there is growing awareness that culturally sacralized work – such as nursing – is still work and can be subject to strategic withdrawal (e.g. the motherhood, midwives’ or sex strike). So, what geographies of gestated-ness, gestating-ness, aborting and miscarrying might become imaginable if a wider range of ongoing social labours were felt to be ‘uterine’, and the uterine made seriously comparable to other labours? Whereas accounts of agentive multi-actant ‘hybridity’ and ‘care’ studies alike can sometimes flatten power relations, implying

that phenomena are desirable simply because they exist and are ‘co-produced’, the drama of gestation *pace* Sadedin poses a drastic challenge to such acquiescence.

Contrary to the harmful fantasy of human maternal generosity as idealized boundlessness – retheorized pragmatically by Myra Hird (2007) – Sadedin notes that our anatomy is perpetually *decreasing* sugar and blood pressure in response to the fetus signalling for more (Sadedin, 2014). Human mothers are thus technically ‘less generous’ than most non-human mothers, she explains. This is because human fetuses, ‘tunnelling towards the mother’s bloodstream’, fight and override her ‘no’ throughout. For instance, they disable her immune system with floods of cortisol and constrict her 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’ (Sadedin, 2014) as their contribution to being made. Yet, to infer from this that to gestate willingly is an irrational embrace of violence and thus actually ‘bad’ – or to take offence because of this implication – is to miss the point of Sadedin’s retelling. Sadedin, who has gestated full terms herself, may feel that her counternarrative is guaranteed to be widely unpopular. Ironically, it shouldn’t necessarily be, since it is possible to read Sadedin as calling upon some of the very same metaphors of combat, competition and complementarity that prevail in *hegemonic* stories about sexual reproduction, as famously analysed by Emily Martin in *The Woman in the Body* (Martin, 1990).

Sadedin’s evolutionary account ultimately coheres with a narrative of fetal–maternal antagonism Martin pinpointed in scientific and medical fields, whereby the fetus represents the binary ‘otherness’ of the father’s genetic difference from the mother. As Monica Casper has in turn convincingly argued, this narrative underpinned notions of the fetus as subject (Casper, 1998) which have, to date, been deployed exclusively to women’s detriment. Nevertheless, Sadedin’s tacit insistence on the agonism of gestation does not strike me primarily as a subjectification (or vilification) of the fetus but rather as a clear call to (in Haraway’s phrase) ‘stay

with the trouble’. Martin’s and Casper’s interventions have been invaluable, and to me it follows from rather than contradicts them to say that a way of articulating gestational labour still needs to be found that both acknowledges violence and does something progressive with that acknowledgment. As elsewhere on earth, conflicts of interest mediated in the placenta always coexist with confluences of interest; elements of antagonism must be acknowledged and addressed, rather than denied. Indisputably, Sadedin leaves to others the task of contemplating a possible affirmative politics informed by her claims. ‘How did we humans get so unlucky?’ is the pivotal evolutionary question for Sadedin. ‘What do we do about this?’ is one that could be taken up in the critical social sciences and humanities.

Care and the human matrix

In geographic engagements with the myriad labours that provision basic emotional and biophysical human and proto-human needs intergenerationally, there has been a tendency to refrain from criticism or even close assessment. This is well-motivated: ‘care’ and ‘social reproduction’ are, after all, tantamount to mothering, and mothering – together with the desire to abstain from it – is already structurally subject to a barrage of punitive coercion and policing (Longhurst, 2008; Martin, 1990; Murphy, 2012). Those of us who are would-be critics of capitalist White-supremacist patriarchy perceive that mothers (particularly mothers of colour) are not primarily culprits of systemic evils but rather, primarily, victims. As a result, critical geography occasionally waxes a little schizoid: excoriating ‘the’ family while at the same time valorizing it as a site of ‘care’.

Rather than helping in advancing scholar-reproducers through these very real contradictions, the genre of social reproduction study with which I identify can in my view sometimes become disjointed and disorienting, keenly focused on divisions of familial labour that cross micro- and macro-borders, for example, yet warped by the assumption that mothers perpetrate little or no structurally consequential violence. As thinkers of

reproduction's world-shaping power, we paradoxically want not to implicate mothers as harmful agents. Perhaps this move damns mothers by failing to gesture towards a better mothering horizon for everyone. It is for these reasons, I believe, that Marion Werner suggested that the turn animated by 'care' and 'social reproduction' sometimes obscures more than it reveals (Werner, 2016). Inseparable from 'production', she said, social reproduction perpetually risks collapsing into 'life' and becoming an unwieldy 'everythingism' whose analytic affordances are not clear. 'Care' geography, then, is futile if we do not draw distinctions between good and bad care, conscious and unconscious abuse, and acceptable and unacceptable structural familial violence (from gestation onward).

Sticking with the challenge of thinking 'care' and 'social reproduction' in meaningful ways remains for me an important route to apprehending the extent and (more importantly) the *limits* of capitalism's penetration into life, body and soul. At its best, theorizing these matters encourages multifaceted consciousness of the intertwinement of capital with our intimate lives and provides a perpetual reminder of the ability we possess collectively to *not* reproduce capital (and to reproduce not-capital). The difficulty of apprehending the difference between social reproduction and capitalist reproduction (except analytically) guarantees confusion, certainly, but also reflects the framework's depth. When we engage with social reproduction's normative stakes (rather than, as sometimes happens, simply naming various things and phenomena as 'part of social reproduction' without at least gesturing at how that could be otherwise or explaining why it matters) we are goaded, in a way I find uniquely thoroughgoing, to remake life in a liveable mould.

Kendra Strauss distinguishes three constitutive parts of social reproduction: '[1] biological reproduction, [2] the reproduction of the labouring population, and [3] provisioning and caring needs' (Strauss, 2013: 182). They are not distinct. (Where does 'biology' end and 'care' begin?) Still, it is possible to say that interdisciplinary Marxian feminists and 'surplus population' studies have focused extensively on the second of these (McIntyre and Nast 2011; Nast, 2011); while meanwhile, the third

rubric, 'care', has taken off conceptually across the social sciences, especially in geography, where calls for 'geographies of care', 'geographies of intimacy', 'care politics' and 'landscapes of caring' have been legion (Lawson, 2007; Lewis, 2016; Parr, 2003; Valentine, 2008). By and large, however, as I argue in the two subsequent sections, when geographers have thought about number [1] they have neglected the qualitative dimensions of the uterine, for instance, the ways in which that labour and its various outcomes can be collectively constituted. It is certainly safe to say that there have not been many conversations framed about gestating, *not* gestating, refusing to gestate, ceasing to gestate, and gestating 'otherwise' (perhaps sharing, delegating or automating it) all together, in one breath. Viewing these matters together could highlight uncomfortable political imperatives: strategically non-provisioning and non-caring; not-reproducing certain labouring populations *as* labouring populations; and placing an embargo on the very idea of 'biological' reproduction. The result of the trinity articulated explicitly by Strauss, anyway, has been that scholars mostly hold back from talking about the actual labour of Strauss's first component as *social* reproduction.

To take Sadedin's anti-romantic description of gestation and extrapolate from it about the nature of care might begin something like this: there is inevitably a lot of boundary violation and reciprocal non-consensual use, and it is always asymmetric. Too few of us are equipped to know *how much* of it is inevitable or to generalize about what is acceptable. Reproducers seldom confront the unacceptable in the people they reproduce (or love). There is a tendency among people – and the many entities that compose them – towards unconscious self-defence and extractivism as well as towards cooperation. Humans come into the world with astonishingly resource-intensive, brain-heavy bodies, expensive to manufacture and to maintain, so much so that giving us life is fatal to many other beings. Holding us is hard and letting go of us is even harder. The cyborg matter of uterine (matrixial) praxis is all about this blood-stained and productive care; this holding and letting go, whether or not an actual uterus is involved.

The assumption here is that a somewhat unbounded uterine site exists of historically

contingent, technological and biological encounter; something a little more specific than the new Harawayian sympoietics, yet broader than Ettinger's copoietics. The trampling-nurturing-and-growing-out-of-one-another I have in mind generates an immanent more-than-human politics. Thinking about how we and others are manufactured, in this spirit, may allow us to remember that the manufacturing was never singular nor completed at birth – and to treat even seemingly distant humanity accordingly. For, if they can reject bioessentialist and gynocentric feminisms, 'geographers' are well placed to inquire normatively into the ferociously intimate uterine relationships in which all human identity is grounded. They are skilled at tracking 'transcorporeal' traces and could develop politically necessary resources by spatializing the gestation-abortion-surrogacy-miscarriage-menses-adoption-foster care continuum in relation to borders, classes, racial categories and myriad (human or more-than-human) parents.

I have suggested so far that the relationship between uterine activity and a 'feminist care ethic' – indeed, the relationship between the uterus and feminism generally – should not be assumed to be unidirectionally 'generous' but instead treated as open to determination within a new geographic account of how the world is populated. I've stated but not yet defended my perception that qualitative and normative issues around uterine labour – the making, not making and unmaking of humans – has been neglected within critical geography's (broadly anti-capitalist) project. I now propose complicating the 'care' framework by looking at literal gestation geographically and, later, bringing in what I think could be seen as gestation-like features of other forms of sociality. Social reproduction and labour theory will benefit if duly ambivalent attention is given to the unfree, both mingling and mangling, destructive and regenerative, relationality that is modelled in that dark, wet arena of care (a word that, after all, is also synonymous with trouble and grief).

Inter/intrauterine: A missing matrix

Robyn Longhurst has written that 'we have all occupied interuterine space' (Longhurst, 2001: 128). It

seems clear in context that she means 'intrauterine', but the accidental posit of *interuterine space* has the potential to stimulate appreciation of the geographical valence of the uterine – a web of holding and letting go that transcends corporeal boundaries – that I am interested in pursuing. We do in fact all occupy interuterine space and, as I see, it, combining interuterine with intrauterine geography at the analytic level is the challenge we face: extending Longhurst's account of 'fluid boundaries' so as to encompass and adopt unlikely (adult) gestator-gestatees. Bracha Ettinger forges a relevant path in a very different disciplinary context, namely psychoanalysis, proposing – in relation to artistic copoiesis – that one must think gestational-formation as 'metramorphosis' (*metra*, like *matrix*, derives from the Greek for uterus and denotes a kind of antonym of *meta*, i.e. non-transcendence). Her idea that human becoming happens in matrixial 'border-space' is an intra *and* interuterine imaginary (albeit a highly abstract version). For her, 'The womb, fetus, pregnancy and gestation [are seen both] as corpo-Realities and image', they are 'supports for a matrixial field of theorisation' (Ettinger, 2006: 182). Ettinger demands that matrixial consciousness go beyond 'the' womb and refuse to separate what goes on 'inside' from the rest of social existence, since the constant opening up of borders and surfaces between social individuals is historically continuous. Transposed back to the fleshy contexts I've touched upon, in other words, one may say: it's sympoiesis, entanglement, and chimerism *all the way down*.

Ettinger claims that the constant *metramorphoses* in which people participate (by living, caring, and dying together more or less consciously, more or less *well*) produce emergent 'trans-subjectivities'. None of us is exempt; as Ettinger clarifies: 'the idea of the matrix should not be identified with the womb, nor Woman with Mother' (Ettinger, 2006: 183). And, just as mothering is not limited to 'mothers' (narrowly defined), the stakes of matrixial ethics are also more-than-human. Grounding personhood in the 'matrix' draws attention to the contingent and artificial but also *conscious* and fragile character of kinship, identity and relatedness, undermining the 'natural' accretions of power,

entitlement and inequality that go along with them. It also invites us to mess with genealogy and biogenetics by tracing vertical (temporal) *and* horizontal (spatial) relationships between uteruses, their containers and their contents: hormonal flows, endocrinal, epigenetic and milk bonds linking various more or less animate matrixial producer-products across homes, continents and generations. Geography and related fields have, for the most part, yet to think about the cyborg affordances of the uterine in this way explicitly.

The underrepresentation of gestating-ness within critical post-humanities, technopolitics, ecomarxisms and new materialisms is most obviously attributable to the desire to repudiate a widespread caricature of second wave feminist womb-celebration. Kathi Weeks has carefully argued, in her reappraisal of the feminist 1970s, that this desire betokens not only ‘inattention . . . shame and disavowal [but] a more active mode of forgetting’ at the heart of feminism’s own historiography (Weeks, 2012: 735). Gynocentrism was and remains a hugely flawed part of feminism’s history. Ironically, the instrumentalization of women *as* wombs is only now finding a kind of literal expression in history, namely in the gestational outsourcing (commercial surrogacy) industry where affirmations of worker autonomy are slowly making themselves heard (Kroløkke and Pant, 2012; Lewis, 2015). Even as gestation becomes partially professionalized, so-called ‘fetal rights’ acts and other anti-abortion legislative strategies are flourishing around the world. And, unfortunately, as touched on in the introduction, the simultaneous discursive success of a rightist technophobic wing within feminism – the so-called ‘radfem’ (‘radical feminist’) school and its ecoprimitivist affiliates (Lewis, 2017a) – has resulted in an oddly authoritarian organicist stranglehold (which passes as progressive) on the meaning of ‘the’ womb and what ‘the’ womb ‘wants’.

Among those who have pitted pregnancy *per se* against patriarchy, alienation, technology and capitalism in the west is the international network *Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering* (FINRRAGE) (Lewis, 2017a). Besides opposing all forms of assisted reproduction in the 1980s, FINRRAGE

activists were on the other side of the fracas over the valence of cybernetics crystallized for posterity by the Cyborg Manifesto. Certainly one of the targets of Haraway’s text at the time was a Euro-American feminism that relied too uncritically on the emancipatory value of a transhistoric ‘procreativity’ of ‘the mothering class’. Haraway was not alone in pointing out that such Euro-American goddess-feminism often tokenized indigenous, colonized, poor and low-caste gestators in their gestures towards centering those groups in their analysis (Lewis, 2017a). It sometimes violently policed the definition of ‘womanhood’ and the bounds of participation in its liberation, cleaving to the physicalist assumption that belonging to an oppressed and exploited category depends on particular (unclassed, unraced) body-parts. Yet the rejection of anti-reprotech purism – as far as geographers are concerned – unexpectedly resulted in the disappearance of even the situated, cyborg uterus from geography.

In ‘Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture’s Generations’, Haraway (2011a) takes up the nurturing yet menacing figure of the gestating wombat-alien sculpted in various different iterations by the artist Patricia Piccinini. These sculptures of fictional humanoids have marsupial-like pouches and are glossed appreciatively by Haraway as companions who ‘nourish indigestion’; their gestation technodigests, she says, categories like kinship, family and sex (Haraway, 2011a). But noticeably, Haraway has dedicated little or no ink directly to today’s *actually existing* human surrogates, the gestational labourers who define a new facet of an old global division of reproductive labour, and who in some cases have already ‘nourished indigestion’ by organizing politically as mother-workers to make demands of their contractors (the ‘intended parents’) or clinical surrogacy managers (Lewis, 2016). Thus, while engagement with Haraway in geography is ubiquitous, engagement with the many different loci of the uterus (including tech alternatives to it and speculative or figurative versions of its functionality) has been allowed to remain at extremely low ebb. Simultaneously, the liberal bourgeois feminisms of the establishment – as reproductive justice scholars such as Dorothy Roberts and Michelle Murphy tirelessly show – have thrown the vast majority of

proletarian reproducers under the bus (Murphy, 2012 Roberts, 2009).

Mainstream framings of uterine interests have been limited either to trans-exclusionary and gender-normative ‘natural birth’ ideologies or to pragmatic pro-medicalization messaging framed around ‘choice’ – as long as the consumers are figured as national citizens by default (Murphy, 2012 Roberts, 2009). It is in this context that leading feminist geographers have mostly abstained from theorizing uterine creativity and destructivity *per se* as the kind of scalar, co-productive and geopolitical affair they perceive in other dimensions of ‘the production of nature’ (Katz, 2001; Pratt and Rosner, 2012). There is no major geographic exploration of demands like Shulamith Firestone’s for a universally available ectogenetic technology (Firestone, 1970) or of the Wages for Housework campaign’s for a militant and utopian interruption of gestational housework on capitalist patriarchy’s terms (Federici, 1975). Most surprisingly of all, geography has not engaged with the aforementioned science around mosaicism, chimerism and epigenetics, even though it is rife with migratory and spatial imagery. Heidi Nast has proposed to geographers that we ‘breach the domain of (procreational) sex’ by returning ‘biology’s centrality to reproduction’ (Nast, 2011: 1463) but it is as yet unclear to me what kind of biology she means, or how it guards against queerphobic effects. The miscarriage-threatening bargaining-power of contemporary ‘gestational assistants’ (surrogates and ‘mothers’ alike) is indeed something one must conceptualize in terms of the ‘necro(bio)power’ Nast and McIntyre have theorized (Nast and McIntyre, 2011). However, I would like to see much more full-throated and explicitly *queer*-feminist grappling with the creativity and destructivity that characterizes the inter and intra-uterine continuum.

The uterus in geography

In my reading, Robyn Longhurst’s *Maternities* (2008) and *Bodies* (2001) tacitly demonstrate the subtle difference between studying ‘being pregnant’ – at which Longhurst excels – and thinking geographically ‘with’ the uterus, which I submit is still

mostly uncharted territory. Longhurst’s two illuminating books provide a vivid ‘corporeography’ of pregnant embodiment as it seeps into public space, particularly the threat of vomit, sweat, milk, blood or amniotic fluid erupting unceremoniously from the gestating individual. These dynamics are certainly not remote from what gestating *is*, but they do include a ‘ground zero’ account of gestational relationality on the *inside* (of the kind Sadedin provides). It is striking to me that neither of Longhurst’s monographs contains the active words ‘gestate’, ‘gestates’, ‘gestating’ or ‘gestated’; the same, however, is true of Catherine Nash’s *Genetic Geographies* (2015). While it can be argued that the term ‘gestation’ is a medical one, it is nevertheless one of the few active verbs that denote ‘being pregnant’. I consider the epistemic tweak that would animate a gestating-centred uterine corporeography subtle but meaningful, irreducible of course to mere choice of words, but basically absent from these texts. It is the interior of the uterus that is missing from these geographic accounts of kinmaking, and consequently, they fall short of mapping intra *and* interuterine space. Ironically, Longhurst herself says that this ‘closest of all spaces . . . is seldom discussed in geographical discourse’ (Longhurst, 2001: 128).

The elision thereby indicated occurs even where those influenced by actor-network theory (ANT) are addressing everyday birthing. For example, geographer Katharine McKinnon ‘map[s] birth spaces’, listing ‘coalitions of actants who are human (mother, baby, obstetrician, midwife), non-human (wheelchair, clock, scalpel) and sub-human (hormones)’ (McKinnon, 2016). Yet, here, strangely, organs such as the placenta and the uterus do not figure alongside hormones in the ‘subhuman’ category in this choreography. McKinnon’s multi-sited, multi-actant ethnography quotes post-partum women to great effect and follows a couple of individual labours and deliveries back and forth between home and hospital in the form of a drama involving ideological contestation around ‘home birth’ versus ‘medicalization’. McKinnon successfully evokes a highly contingent co-production featuring many players and agentive objects. Yet this ANT-inflected account of parturition would be further enriched, I maintain, by making explicit its

implicit sense of intrauterine liveliness: the ensemble of hormonally flooded processes coming to a head in the interior of an abdomen, and their complex distribution across the spectrums conscious/unconscious, agentive/non-agentive.

Kate Boyer and Justin Spinney (2016), in an overview of feminist geography's work on public parenting, propose, excitingly, that: 'motherhood is an accomplishment realised in part through encounters with the more than human' (Boyer and Spinney, 2016: x). Ultimately they mean baby-related mobility baggage, 'stuff', infrastructural friction, a lack of provisioning and access undergirding the world one traverses in the company of babies. Poignantly summarizing the findings of over 15 items of scholarship on caring and mothering, they show how the needs of babies and their carers are systematically ignored in the public realm. None of their source materials address the specificity of actually holding or letting go a fetus, gestating not at all, abortively or 'to term', as a topic distinct from *becoming a parent*. Boyer and Spinney's article according focuses, like McKinnon's, less on the uterine than on the public-sphere mobilities of the mother-baby-pram assemblage. Although sympathetic to their project, I contend that the 'more-than-human' stakes of human reproduction come into view long before buggies and bottles appear on the scene. I wonder if one could treat prenatal space as continuous with the frictional vicissitudes of public space Boyer and Spinney animate, even stretching the field from intrauterine holding through to assistive technology in elder care and the work of 'death doulas' – without romanticizing any of it (just as Boyer and Spinner avoid doing). Public-sphere 'carescapes' and caring mobilities are clearly rich and important seams for critical and policy-oriented study. Boyer and Spinney's insight into the more-than-human and encounter-based composition of 'motherhood' invites an extension of itself, inward and outward, as it were, 'thinking through the skin' (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001).

Proposals *have* appeared from geographers to notice 'placental relations' (Fannin, 2014). The *Antipode* collection *Life's Work: Geographies of Social Reproduction* has surveyed 'the interpellation of subjects as life workers' (Katz, Marston and

Mitchell, 2004: 3) and features a chapter on the renaturalization of pregnancy in hospital birthing suites built as simulacrum of a bourgeois bedroom. The author of the latter, Maria Fannin, together with Rachel Colls, elaborate on the need to 'think geographically 'with' the placenta... as a relational organ' (Fannin and Colls, 2013: 1087). Fannin and Colls compellingly adapt JM Maher's theorization of the pregnant subject as one that 'does not depend on closed edges in order to construct itself' where 'connection and distinction are not necessarily framed as mutually exclusive' (Fannin and Colls, 2013: 1089). Hiding in plain sight, placental relations readily 'serve as a model for thinking differently about the presumptions of boundedness, fixity, stasis, and identity that tend to underwrite more familiar geographical spaces of borders, barriers, territories, and boundaries' (Fannin and Colls, 2013: 1098–1099). Is this not uterine geography? In some senses yes: the placenta is tracked as an 'interior surface' that 'resurfaces', exiting the body only to re-enter it (or other bodies) in the form of meals or swallowed capsules (placentophagy), returning to the earth in Māori ceremonial rituals (*whenua* burial) or seeping through the pores of cosmetics consumers in the form of specialist skin cream. I concur wholeheartedly with Fannin and Colls that, 'despite a focus on the maternal–fetal relation during and after pregnancy in the feminist literature... there have been limited engagements with the placenta' (Fannin and Colls, 2013: 1089); my aspiration is that our projects may be coextensive. But the placental is not synonymous with the uterine and does not, I think, lend itself so easily to non-gynocentric political appropriation.

The difference may seem slight but its domain is encroaching, protecting, and filtering rather than holding and letting go. Accordingly, Fannin and Colls do not explicitly acknowledge the reality that the relational result of gestation is not always 'motherhood' – as we see in surrogacy, abortion, abandonment and miscarriage – and suggest tacitly that it should be. Indeed, the authors sharply reject, on feminist grounds, characterizations like Sadein's of maternal–fetal exchange as violent, preferring, with Myra Hird, 'generosity' as the byword for pregnancy. I see no real 'feminist' need for this

gesture and plenty of reasons why accounts of pregnancy that equate caring with the good need to be complicated. The method in question implies that the relational result of gestation is normatively determinate and manifestly takes for granted that un-engineered human uterine lining is the optimal environment for nurturing a human embryo. Sadedin (like Firestone in 1971) opens the possibility that it is not. To say so is not a threat to 'women' or fetuses.

The further danger of tracking the placenta rather than the whole of the uterus is that it risks overlooking the animacy of the other parties in gestation (i.e. gestator and gestatee), together with the contingency of their doing and their being there. As such, to me, even 'placental' geography does not *necessarily* escape the naturalizing 'black-boxing' of procreativity. I do not get a sense, from Fannin and Colls, of the labour that the placenta mediates, through which two beings (or more) emerge as opposite surfaces of one another, on the one hand a being who is already a person, and on the other a speck or lump of pluripotentiality shrouded in endometrial darkness and invisibility, convulsing, erupting, traversed by thousands of frequencies, pressures, proteins, fats and acids. The project on 'the placenta as a passage to becoming' is rightly proposed as a (very valuable) 'supplement [to] a "materialist" account of pregnancy' (Fannin, 2014: 300) rather than a dedicated materialist one.

The term I have now twice deployed, 'black-boxing', is glossed by Julie Guthman as the moment when 'a scientific concept or term is... taken to be objectively established, immutable, or beyond the possibility of human action to reshape it' (Guthman, 2012: 956). Guthman herself is committed to 'the imperative to open up the black box of the body and explore it as an ecological, geographical, and historical object' (Guthman, 2012: 956) – exactly what I desire for the uterus. For example, in her pioneering work on the more-than-human, endocrinal, economically and historically contingent production of corporeal fat, Guthman avers: 'current geographic perspectives on obesity black-box the human body and treat it as a machine that processes calories in a predictable manner' (Guthman, 2012:

954). The political ecology of gestation I would like to abet would similarly treat the body's processes and products – menses, miscarriages, relationships and newborn persons, instead of adipose tissue – as historically open. Tim Cresswell ventures in this direction when he considers a neglected aspect of human uterine activity among other common biopolitical metaphors that posit 'matter-out-of-place', namely the still-prevalent 'view of menstruation as failed production' (Cresswell, 1997: 334). Cresswell has not pursued uterine geography per se but in his discussion of secretions as metaphors he quotes Emily Martin's suggestion that 'Menstruation could just as well be regarded as the making of life substance that... heralds our non-pregnant state, rather than as the casting off of the debris of endometrial decay or as the haemorrhage of necrotic blood vessels' (Martin 1990: 80 quoted in Cresswell, 1997: 341). Consequently, Cresswell is one of relatively few geographers to have engaged with *The Woman in the Body* and to make links between Martin's findings and other forms of spatial organization of lively biology that discipline social 'pluripotentiality'. Cresswell's and Guthman's work immanently gesture towards an innovative approach to the uterus that doesn't carry a pro-reproduction bias.

'Assisted reproduction'

Lately, anthropologists and sociologists have busied themselves analysing *exceptional* terrains of the uterine such as the 'clinical labours' (Cooper and Waldby, 2014) mobilized by bioeconomic markets in 'third-party' gestational contracts (Lewis, 2016). But the valence of this tacitly accepted 'exceptionality' – of outsourced uterine productivity in relation to non-commercial social reproduction, 'surrogacy' in relation to non-surrogacy – can become somewhat ambiguous under scrutiny, in the sense that scholars exempt themselves from clarifying whether the distinction they draw is normative or descriptive (Lewis 2017b). In this section, I make the case that while the distinction may be an accurate description of the capitalist organization of directly versus indirectly market-mediated

reproductive spheres, its replication in social–scientific critique has anti-solidaritous effects.

The ambiguous yet taken-for-granted siloization of ‘assisted reproduction’ in relation to (simply) ‘reproduction’ is a habit human geographers should not acquire. The division of conceptual labour that puts care and social reproduction studies to one side and ‘reprotech’ on the other, I argue, risks itself becoming part of the unthinking reproduction of capitalist, heteropatriarchal, cis-normative and racist reproductive stratification. I urge instead that scholars in geography, once they have embraced the uterine, should proliferate queer and counter-intuitive examples of reproductive assistance, which is to say, desirable and utopian praxes of life- and death-enabling holding and letting go that provincialize (without rejecting) the normative biogenetic model of family. I will visit a couple more theoretic fellow travellers and then give two perhaps unexpected examples to kick things off.

Literary critic Stacy Alaimo carves an instructive path. Marking the concern that ‘the potent category of ‘mother’ threatens to engulf the entire range of identities that women inhabit’ (Alaimo, 2010: 104), *Bodily Natures* nevertheless refuses to shy away from discussing pregnancy. The discussion in question operates in Alaimo’s signature ‘transcorporeal’ mode whose focus – although race- and gender-sensitive – is not gender, nor even sex, but the production of nature. An instinctive interuterine thinker, Alaimo ably captures the entanglement of creative labour and unconscious vitality in gestation, while pluralizing ‘natures’ and distinguishing between them normatively. Examples of potentially undesirable as well as desirable uterine relations become clear as she charts a series of toxin flows that connect the amniotic womb-habitat with the wider environment’s fluid reservoirs, topsoils, hot- and cold-blooded animal bodies, plant nectar and oceans: a moist chemical world, a matrix of our bodies for which we are collectively responsible. If pregnancy is an ‘inland ocean with a population of one’ (Alaimo, 2010: 103), it is in the sense that an ocean can never be a ‘sealed chamber, apart from water cycles and food chains’ (p. 106) or for that matter markets and states. Likewise, the geographer Becky Mansfield sees evidence of fetal harm caused

via seafood consumption, and the porosity of gestational bodies, ‘as a lesson in the potential openness of all bodies to all environments, with recognition of how different people are imbricated differently in this open environment’ (Mansfield, 2012: 976).

The *differential* character of imbrication, which the more euphoric theorizations downplay, is everything. Social co-imbrication may sound polymorphously sexy and exciting to many of us, but let it not be forgotten that – as in gestation – it is too often unconsensual. For some, to simply be ‘imbricated’ without the mitigating help of boundaries, barricades and weapons is simply to be unsupported, exposed and vulnerable. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P Johnson, two trans-women of colour active in gay liberation, managed to set up an open family home in a building in New York’s East Village. This was the STAR house, for STAR ‘kids’, the survival wing of their organization Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. The commune’s primary provisioning strategies were sex-work (in the mothers’ case) and shoplifting (in the kids’). STAR house was a response to the annihilation of its initiators’ queer comrades – ‘brothers and sisters’ – by the police, the state, poverty, AIDs and a violently queerphobic society. Although we do not usually use the term this way, this was clearly a moment of ‘assisted reproduction’:

We got a building at 213 East 2nd Street. Marsha and I just decided it was time to help each other and help our other kids. We fed people and clothed people. We kept the building going. We went out and hustled the streets. We paid the rent. We didn’t want the kids out in the streets hustling. They would go out and rip off food. There was always food in the house and everyone had fun. It lasted for two or three years. (Rivera, 2011)

The STAR House may not have experienced much conventional gestation or menstruation. But the focus of a uterine geography need not be a narrow conception of uterine space. As ‘uterine’ agents in this sense, Rivera and Johnson enabled surviving and managed dying, holding up a star in the city, a space for living, while regulating what they were willing to give across the intimate interface of the House,

holding, then letting go, its constituent adult children and their obdurate trajectories of becoming.

In a different wing of transfeminist reproductive theory and practice, the biological uterus is now a primary raw material for a bio-hacking cooperative in Catalonia called 'GynePunk'. These DIY engineers specialize (semi-ironically) in 'witchcraft' and call themselves a 'hackteria' (hacker collective) (Thorburn, 2016). Another way of describing them would be: uterine scholar-activists. While its members write in Spanish about the trust and collective holding that undergirds their scientific praxis, the lab is also currently emphasizing the ability to expertly *let go* – of fetuses. Barcelona's GynePunks are reviving the bottom-up knowledge of secret herbal emmenagogues unearthed in the West Indies in *Plants and Empire* (Schiebinger, 2007). They declare themselves on their tumblr and wiki to have hybridized these methods with mechanical, synthetic, *in vitro* and even biogenetic techniques in order to recompose themselves as a class (Thorburn, 2016). The vision of GynePunk is, thus, one other template for those who wish to socially reproduce themselves via the most mutually desirable forms of care they can discover ongoingly through experiment and *mētis* (bricolage-based lay knowledge production).

The two models of trans-inclusive reproductive praxis alluded to here take for granted that all reproduction is assisted reproduction. Like other contemporary calls for reproductive freedom, voiced by trans- or cis-people alike, they frame themselves as a fight for the right to live, a fight channelled via direct actions seizing communized healthcare, user-directed research methods and universal free access to (i.e. common ownership of) the 'means of reproduction' (Murphy, 2012). I believe a 'uterine' politics may be one way of finding conceptual purchase on the contours of this reproductive freedom struggle. A 'uterine' and 'matrixial' conceptualization of care and social reproduction – in which we become through each other, asymmetrically holding and letting go – should attend to the plethora of reasons why given bodies do not literally gestate, from contraceptives to lifestyle to not having a uterus, appreciating that their bearers all too often literally transmit life and/or help mediate death. These

geographies must include such things as migrations of wet nurses, surrogates and au pairs, as well as the removal, recrafting and redistribution of uteri (through transplant technology).

In *The Argonauts* (2015) Maggie Nelson undergoes IVF at the same time as her partner remakes his sex, and meanwhile, her mother-in-law courageously makes the crossing from life to death. The book's title recalls the mythical Argo, a ship whose parts were all replaced, one by one. Becoming and remaining the Argo were the same thing and, as such, the ship is analogous (on Nelson's terms) to any human being, the better word for which would in fact be 'human becoming', as Paul Channing Adams offers (Channing Adams, 1995). Humans are regenerative fictions who manage to retain identities despite (or because of) the fact that nothing in our bodies stays the same decade upon decade except, possibly, bone marrow. *The Argonauts* accordingly produces a sense of the self as a relation; an encounter that can only be collective and emergent. While it speaks to almost anyone, this wisdom springs painfully from the experience of transsexual, gender-transitioning and artificially fertilized pregnant bodies. Such are the characteristics of the twin protagonists of *The Argonauts*: two mutant queers who hold each other and, again and again, let go of each other's past and present selves. Together, Maggie and Harry's organs, muscles and endocrinal systems move, shed and morph. A transman who self-administers testosterone transforms his bone mass. A gestator's body is irreversibly colonized by strange DNA in the form of living fetal cells.

Pregnancy is, for Nelson, a quintessentially queer phenomenon, 'occasioning a radical intimacy with – and radical alienation from – one's body' (Nelson, 2015: 14). Maggie wonders:

How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolise or enact the ultimate conformity? Or is this just another disqualification of anything tied too closely to the female animal from the privileged term (in this case, nonconformity, or radicality)? (Nelson, 2015: 14)

Have radical geographers, in their non-interest in the mapping of the uterine, colluded in this

mistaking of pregnancy for ‘the ultimate conformity’? Radical scholars tend to be critical (often damning) of the bio-nuclear family, yet they sometimes forget these criticisms when parsing ‘repro-tech’, implying that a special evil inheres in this unsettling ‘exception’. Meanwhile, childless, non-reproductive or ‘found’ families such as STAR House and GynePunk are also excluded from the topic of reproduction. As we can see from these living histories, there are many things, relations and ways to reproduce – including temporary and utopian insufficiencies, experiments and absences. A normal, prosthesis-free family doesn’t exist.

Conclusion: The more-than-human uterus

It is odd that the uterine does not feature explicitly in many geographers’ accounts of ‘the carnal body as the mattering forth of discourse and flesh’ (Detamore, 2010: 250); of the ‘the nature of the person, as a geographic entity... spill[ing] over boundaries... [via] processes of fluctuating, dendritic extension’ (Channing Adams, 1995: 267). Scott Kirsch seems poised to mention gestation when he asks – in an overview of technocultural geographies – ‘what it means to be formative in the production of nature’ (Kirsch, 2014: 692). Yet he doesn’t. Perhaps the sheer hyperdetermination of the terrain makes it seem fatally difficult to venture any normative account of uterine intra-action without making constant reference to ‘women’ or speaking *from* that subject-position. Nonetheless, as we’ve seen, it is possible. I would even venture to say that a non-gynocentric gestational politics has always existed in the cracks and underpassages of the prison-house of binary sex/gender. We do not always want to see the violent side of care, the violent side of gestation. We are deeply attached to these processes, and they are indeed almost all we’ve got. They are the strangely undervalued and at the same time fiercely defended contribution of a disproportionately feminized and racialized contingent of humanity. But this in itself does not prove that they are good by default. Alienated low-status carers and multigendered mothers are complicit with and even instrumental in systemic violence.

Whereas ‘caring geographies’ and ‘social reproduction’ studies sometimes merely draw attention to the unpaid love that glues everything together, an critical, anti-violent politicization of these processes would need to radically transform and not just revalue the domains of care and reproduction. Accordingly, we also need to strengthen our defence of non-nihilistic carers who are biologically speaking non-reproducers. In many circumstances, the act of the most oppressed – for instance, the enslaved – has been to refuse participation in uterine creativity altogether, through subversive and secret use of abortifacients, or by committing infanticide in response to circumstances they have judged unlivable (Schiebinger, 2007).

Where does the uterine end? Uterine geography would have no grounds to silo off such presently disparate-seeming issues as indigenous midwifery, surrogacy, underground abortion providers, co-parenting, gamete donation, DIY hysterectomies, mitochondrial transfers (a new technique yielding ‘three-parent babies’), shelters for queer homeless people, womb transplants, polymaternalism and ‘death doulas’, instead gathering them together. Where geographers have studied these things at all they have studied them in isolation and failed to embed them in the theoretic context of long-standing reproductive justice and liberation struggles. ‘Care’ may or may not cover what uteruses do (e.g. menstruate, proliferate, placentate, gestate). Whatever we decide, it behooves us to ask: might not uteri help expose the limits – and thus, better define the value – of the ‘care’ framework? Care may be all we’ve got, but that is no reason, after all, to suppose it doesn’t need thoroughgoing remediation, transformation and automation. Like families, gestating uteruses are often very harmful zones (harmful for everyone involved).

In my somewhat wishful interpretation, the more-than-human turn locates social reproduction in the relations between persons, creatures and things, while at the same time allowing the former to matter *more*. (The focus, as I see it, is expressible as ‘humans, and more’ in the knowledge that there is no such thing as a ‘just human’.) In the words of Nina Power:

Only a collective, non-nihilistic non-reproduction of certain aspects of the status quo can ensure that we are thinking and acting according to the right scale: the trick is to work out what we can and cannot say no to, together. (Power, 2014)

In this spirit, assuming that it is possible to bracket some of the controversiality that dogs the ‘unborn’, we should be able to appreciate that it would be a great analytic loss to geography to let human intrauterine productivity fall into a gap between our interest in the human, on the one hand, and non-human, on the other. The designation ‘more-than-human’ emerged, as I understand it, precisely to prevent the formation of such a gap. And if anything deserves the moniker ‘more-than-human’, it is the activity of the human uterus. Curiously, though, in our justified enthusiasm to expand our understanding of social reproduction’s purview *beyond* the human, in order for instance to account for ‘lively commodities’ and to describe the more-than-human genesis of ‘encounter-value’, we have skipped over this salient site of unstable, co-produced and emergent more-than-humanity.

The horizon of uterine possibility, in terms of technofuturistic mobility and hybrid entanglement, has been greatly expanded in the last two decades: successful human uterus transplants have been undertaken since 2014; commercial surrogacy clinics routinely curate pregnancies involving no genetic link between gestator and gestated; neonatal machine-incubators are able to take over from the human body at 20 weeks’ gestation if necessary; and ectogenetic experiments (for fully disembodied gestation) are advancing apace. Not least because these innovations apply strain to the naturalness of ‘unassisted’ reproduction, this discussion has defended the premise that the best place to uncover the weirdest more-than-human fundamentals of social reproduction is everyday pregnancy, as enacted by any old ‘normal’ uterus, thereby demonstrating in the process that there is no such thing. Maggie Nelson’s poetic account of labour ‘doing you’ theorized that, in crafting human life, we touch our own death along the way. So, what kind of care might emerge from gestators’ commitment not to forget that encounter with death? How are we to

generate conditions in which not-forgetting it is possible, at the same time as participating in the demands of social reproduction? After all, in Nelson’s pithy, almost accusatory observation, ‘I cannot hold my baby at the same time as I write’ (Nelson, 2015: 37). The structural incompatibility of reproducing and theorizing under present conditions is one of the key concrete as well imaginative limitations of the capitalist form of reproduction, and a clear incentive to build a new form of reproduction premised as much on holding as it is on – simultaneously – making (or unmaking).

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Cyborg uterine geographies: Complicating care and social reproduction or queering the uterine

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Abstract

This short commentary responds to the article by Sophie Lewis. It focuses on the sanitized body of/within geography; determinacy; the challenge of the collective in creating restrictions; the focus on ‘normal’ aspects and then it offers a challenge to consider how in doing uterine geographies we might create new knowledge through engagements that reflect the theory.

Keywords

bodies, collectives, new engagements

How do you move beyond the ‘hyperdetermination’ of the uterus and its link to female embodiedness, care and women? How do you create space to speak outside of that subject position? A task that has to now not only not been attempted in geographies but not even articulated as worthy of attention, engagement and theoretical development. How can you queer that which is viewed as ‘essential’ women’s work reproduction and care. The recent Society and Space forum that engaged with the queering of social reproduction (<http://societyandspace.org/2017/10/31/intro-beyond-binaries-and-boundaries-in-social-reproduction/>) argued for excavating ‘the theoretical assumptions, lived contradictions, and political potentials of the knowledge project known as “social reproduction”’ (Andrucki et al., 2017: 1). Despite engagements with the ‘maternal’ and Nast (2017) in particular seeking to queer the maternal through a critical engagement with economies that

differentiate the biological and the maternal, this paper is undoubtedly a step change, a challenge to geographies not only to engage with the uterine but to rework geographies through this engagement. This rich piece offers much to comment on. In this short commentary, I will focus on the sanitized body of/within geography; determinacy; the challenge of the collective in creating restrictions; the focus on ‘normal’ aspects and then offer one challenge to consider how uterine geographies might create knowledges through how we treat each other.

This paper delves into embodied writing, in a way that is to be applauded. There is the squeamishness about bodies that rivals that squeamishness

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around sex that Binnie (1997) described as ‘scaring the horses’. While we may be able to now somewhat discuss fucking geographies (Bell, 2007), we have not adequately engaged with bodies, in ways that Longhurst (2001, 2008) and others have begun. There is much more to be done. This paper is key to this endeavour and the failure to engage in the biological as a key part of reproduction the ‘actual labour . . . as social reproduction’ (p. 305). But also moving beyond the site (embodied or otherwise) of bloodstained gestation and labour, into bloodstained reproductive care. The sanitized body spaces that are apparent in discussions of parents are challenged by the exploring the messiness of ‘actually holding or letting go a foetus, gestating not at all, abortively or “to term”’ in ways that refuse to see these ‘as a topic distinct from *becoming a parent*’ (p. 309, original emphasis). This paper not only contests these boundaries, it seeks to (re)create geographies through the embodied intrauterine and interuterine fields.

The paper’s critical engagement with social reproduction enables an engagement with care in ways that emphasize the imperative of complicating its necessary link with ‘good’, and indeed names the imperative to investigate good and bad care as a task that is central to feminist engagements with care. The point is well made that critical geographies can both excoriate “the” family while at the same time valorising it as a site of “care” (p. 303). Purporting that the violence of care and the violence of gestation are simultaneously deeply embedded in, yet detached from, understandings of, and engagements with, gestation and social reproduction, the author pushes for new epistemologies.

Insisting on the indeterminacy of the relationship between bodies during gestation opens up discussions of good/bad care that transcends the biological and the social in ways that the alternative ‘generosity’ might not. Viewing the many aspects of gestating ‘all together in one breath’ (‘gestating, not gestating, refusing to gestate, ceasing to gestate, and gestating “otherwise,”’ p. 305) engages an emotional geography of that does not see ‘generosity’ as opposing, or as an alternative to, ‘violence’. This is not only about bringing the biological into conversation with the labouring population and care, it

is also could create political space. As I sit in Dublin, Ireland before a vote on repealing the 8th Amendment that seeks to reverse the ‘equal footing’ of women and foetuses, this idea(!?) is appealing. It enables us to ‘stay with the trouble’ (once again using Haraway’s phrase) and in staying with the trouble, neither the vilification of the foetus nor its celebration is prioritized. There is an acknowledgement of violence without suggesting that there is one way of doing ‘something progressive with that acknowledgement’ (p. 302).

The underpinning argument that whether care and uterine activity not unidirectional, but open to determination, however, could be further developed around other uterine relations. Surrogacy in particular is seemingly treated with more determinacy, and as (always?) the product of uneven power relations and a loss of agency for the uterine. Yet if surrogacy is part of ‘gestating otherwise (perhaps sharing, delegating or automating)’ (p. 305), then its potential and the relations that form it cannot be predetermined. There is much more to be said to explore the complexities and the indeterminacy of care enacted through surrogacy from actors (human and non-human).

This also led me to consider the collective creation of the uterine, the move beyond individual bodies towards a social biology. Of course, the social is always collective creations and it appears to be key in the contribution geographers can make, particularly where it is argued that geographers, if ‘they can reject bioessentialist and gynocentric feminisms’, are:

well placed to inquire normatively into the ferociously intimate uterine relationships in which all human identity is grounded. They are skilled at tracking the ‘transcorporeal’ traces and could develop politically necessary resources by spatializing the gestation-abortion-surrogacy-miscarriage-menses-adoption-fostercare continuum in relation to borders, classes, racial categories and myriad (human or more-than-human) parents. (p. 306)

Where the uterine does rather than is, its collective creation needs further careful consideration, for it is in the collective, and particularly societal

responsibility for uterine values, that unwelcome interventions and restrictions can lie.

A key tenant of the conclusion is that ‘the best place to uncover the weirdest more-than-human fundamentals of social reproduction is everyday pregnancy, as enacted by any old ‘normal’ uterus, thereby demonstrating in the process that there is no such thing’ (p. 314), or perhaps more succinctly ‘A normal prosthesis-free family does not exist’ (p. 313). Yet the fascinating and illuminating examples of queer reproduction focus on trans-communalities, care and social reproduction beyond heteronormativities. This is itself an important task, but queering normal remains a latent possibility. The task that began this commentary is crucial to the endeavour, where discontinuities between the hyperdetermination of the uterus and link to female bodies, is needed, this can be found not only in STAR House, Gynepunk and other places of queer social reproduction but also the queering of ‘normal’ and demonstrating that there is ‘no such thing’.

As a final comment, I want to explore the potential of *doing* uterine geographies. The piece is at times chastising, there is no ‘excuse’ for not undertaking this work in geographies, and not undertaking it enough and in the ways that the author proposes. This oppositional form of engagement creating space for me, by denigrating you, your work and its limits, is problematic and fails to recognize the importance and groundbreaking work that has been undertaken by Longhurst, Fannon and Colls and others. The author is right in noting the limits and in finding rationales for why this work hasn’t been undertaken; however, it is a stretch to argue that radical geographers have a ‘non-interest’ and that pregnancy is seen as ‘the ultimate conformity’ (p. 313). These authors, academics and people are not ‘to blame’, they have not ‘failed’, rather they have laid the groundwork, begun these discussions and created spaces for uterine geographies to exist. They have not done it in the ways that this paper advances, and there are numerous other gaps, oversights and missing elements of geographies. I wondered then, whether alongside the challenging theoretical possibilities, can uterine geographies also create a methodology of engagement based in indeterminacy? What would this look like in ‘caring’ for each other, how might violences

and generousities ‘stay with the trouble’? The modes of engagement that we create with each other are important in developing new geographies and particularly those focused on expansive, if always undetermined, care. Care may be ‘all we have got’, and in its ‘remediation, transformation and automation’, as the author notes, there is a need to explore its damaging effects. I wonder if the author has considered how ‘thinking with the uterus’ might also rework our engagements with each other and ourselves, redefining good/bad care through its doing.

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Thinking geographically with wombs

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Abstract

How can we think geographically with wombs, especially in relation to labour? This is my reading of the question posed by Sophie Lewis in this article ‘Cyborg uterine geography’. The article is challenging not just because the author sets an ambitious task but also because it addresses ‘messy’ bodies long associated with femininity and because it contains terms, phrases and theories that will likely be unfamiliar to some readers. Woven into these theoretical ideas are some helpful examples of how geographers might use the uterus to deromanticize care and social production and instead proliferate that which is often considered to be queer and counter-intuitive. These examples could be developed in future work. So too could how space and place matter to the uterus, and how discourses of the ‘bad’ mother might add weight to arguments about deromanticizing care and social reproduction.

Keywords

‘bad’ mothers, language, space and place, squeamishness

‘Uterine geography’ (regardless of whether one sides with cyborgs or goddesses) is central to understandings of the social and the spatial. We all have mothers from whose wombs we came. Reproduction is not just a mainstay of life, it *is* life. Despite this, based on experience of reactions to my own work on maternal bodies and spaces (e.g. Metro, 1993), it is likely that some will read this article by Sophie Lewis (2018) as being peripheral to geographers’ concerns – not ‘real’ geography. I disagree. I think that theorizing *with* the uterus is an intriguing idea that ought to be of interest to a wide cross section of geographers. It has the potential to prompt the rethinking of a range of concepts such as the making of people and places, self and Other, boundaries, labour, social reproduction and care – things that often sit at the heart of spatial relations.

Lewis, in this article, asks: what geographies of gestation might become imaginable if a ‘wider range of ongoing social labours were felt to be “uterine”, and the uterine [was] made seriously comparable to other labours?’ Or, to put this another way, how can we think geographically with wombs, especially in relation to labour? This is not an easy question to answer.

Reading this article, I reflected on how it has now been more than 15 years since I wrote: ‘the bodies articulated in geographers’ texts have tended to be theoretical, discursive, fleshless bodies’ (Longhurst,

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2001: 1). It struck me that in some regards little has changed. Words such as ‘body’, ‘embodiment’ and ‘corporeal’ still tend to be used in preference to describing the messy traces and processes (internal and external) of bodies, for example, saliva, sperm, sweat (but see Waitt, 2013 and Waitt and Stanes, 2015 as exceptions).

This is not, however, the case with Lewis who does not shy away from using words such as uterus, womb, fetus cervix, parturition, gestation, blood stained, menstruation, hormonal flows and ‘milk bonds’ despite the fact that these words and phrases might prompt in some a sense of ‘squeamishness’ (McNee, 1984). Importantly, and again to rehearse an argument that I have made in the past (Longhurst, 2001), there is a gendered dimension to this. The messy materiality of bodies tend to be associated with women’s bodies (and the bodies of those deemed as Other, e.g. ‘trans’, those who have a disability, are large or ‘fat’). Although *every* body is flesh and blood, men, especially ‘respectable’, middle- and upper class, White men, tend to be discursively constructed as solid, rational and in control of their bodily boundaries while women are not. As McDowell (1993: 306) noted more than 20 years ago:

Women’s experiences of, for example, menstruation, childbirth and lactation, all represent challenges to bodily boundaries. The feminine construction of self is an existence centred within a complex relational nexus, compared to the masculine construction of self as separate, distinct and unconnected.

Although these arguments have now been in circulation for a long time, most geographers are still unaccustomed to reading disciplinary texts about menstruation, childbirth and lactation, and words such as cervix, vaginal and gestating (all of which are used in Lewis’s article) are therefore likely to prompt a reaction. More specifically, addressing a ‘geography of the uterus is likely to mess up a masculinist knowledge based on claims to truth, objectivity and rationality’ (Longhurst, 2001, 129). Lewis’s article, then, has the potential to prompt in geographers and others a response, whether it be negative or positive, thereby sparking

debate and furthering ideas about care and social reproduction.

Continuing on the theme of language, it is not just words that describe body ‘bits’ or processes that might strike readers as noticeable in this article but also that it contains a dizzying array of terms. Personally, I enjoyed the poetry of some of the turns of phrase, but there are sections where I was uncertain as to what exactly was being argued. A few examples of terms and phrases that might be unfamiliar to readers are microchimeric character, matrixial sympoesis, sympoetics, copoeisis, copoetics gestatingness, symbiogenesis, matrixial geography, ‘dark, wet arena of care’, transcorporeal traces, gynocentric feminisms, ecoprimitivist affiliates, ‘amniotic womb-habitat’ and anti-reprotech purism. I am conversant with most of the literature that Lewis draws upon but still found this a challenging read, partly because of the language used and partly because she covers a wide array of topics including goddesses and cyborgs, capitalism, care economies, ‘GynePunks’, ‘mutant queers’ and many others. The article presents material from memoirs, magazine articles, poems and academic literature and brings together different theoretical frameworks including from biologist Suzanne Sadedin and feminist, science and technology scholar Donna Haraway.

Given that the article is a challenging read, it is useful when Lewis filters the ideas through specific examples although this does not occur until the penultimate section. Here Lewis argues that once geographers have embraced the uterine, then it is possible to ‘proliferate queer and counter-intuitive examples of reproductive assistance’. One example of reproductive assistance that she refers to is the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) House that was set up in the late 1960s and early 1970s in New York’s East Village by two individuals, Rivera and Johnson. Lewis describes Rivera and Johnson as ‘uterine agents’ whose aim was to support those who others tend to shun in a queer-phobic society. The second example provided is GynePunk, a bio-hacking cooperative in Catalonia, Spain. Lewis describes this group as ‘uterine scholar-activists’. All reproduction, she argues, is assisted and families such as those at STAR House

and GynePunk ought to be included in topics of reproduction.

These examples help cast light on the argument being made for a 'cyborg uterine geography' but by the end of the article I was still not entirely sure how focusing on the uterus might help to ensure that more non-normative accounts of care and social reproduction emerge. As I said at the beginning of this commentary, the article poses an interesting and ambitious research question about what might be possible by thinking with and politicizing uterine relations but how far she gets in answering this question is probably up for debate. Lewis suggests that by focusing on the uterus, it becomes difficult to 'silo off' multigendered mothers, DIY hysterectomies, three-parent babies, indigenous midwives and others instead bringing them together under one theoretical frame so as to understand more about care and social reproduction. She suggests, pointing to Colls and Fannin's (2013) research on 'Placental surfaces and the geographies of bodily interiors', that focusing on the uterus is potentially more useful than focusing on the placenta as a model for thinking differently about boundedness, identity, territories, care and a range of other topics because it does not 'lend itself so easily to non-gynocentric political appropriation' (p. 313). Lewis argues that Colls and Fannin do not explicitly acknowledge that gestation does not always result in motherhood and therefore they suggest tacitly that it does or should. Again, I think there is probably potential to clarify and extend the argument here.

I appreciated Lewis also turning her attention to two of my own research monographs *Bodies* (2001) and *Maternities* (2008). She explains that although I use words such as 'vomit, sweat, milk, blood and amniotic fluid' to make a point about bodily boundaries in relation to pregnant women, I do explicitly address gestation, and therefore the works do not offer 'a "ground zero" account of gestational relationality on the *inside*' (p. 308, italics in original). Lewis continues that neither of the two aforementioned monographs contain the 'active words' gestate, gestates, gestating or gestated. This is perhaps a fair point but it does raise the question: what exactly is an 'active word'? Maybe what is being referred to here is an active verb, that is, when the

verb is clearly the subject. Again, I was not entirely sure. What I do know though is that many of the pregnant women I have interviewed over a period of decades talk about being pregnant or having a baby but not about gestating. They reflect on being sick, vomiting, their waters breaking and their bellies or stomachs growing but few, if any, have talked with me at length about their uteruses or about gestating. Does this matter for a cyborg uterine geography? It is likely that the doctors and midwives who work with pregnant, aborting, miscarrying and birthing women use these terms but in my experience, the women themselves tend not to. Are the terms gestation or gestate more active than others? How exactly do they 'animate gestating-centred corporeography'? Does including the terms placenta and uterus in Katharine McKinnon's (2014) line-up of coalitions of actants who are human, non-human and sub-human actually create a sense of 'intrauterine liveliness' as Lewis suggests? Again, I am not sure and think there is potential to tease this idea out further.

Another dimension of the argument that I think is worthy of further reflection in subsequent work is how place, space and geography matter to the uterus. Although the title is 'Cyborg uterine geography', there is potential to think more about how geography matters to wombs or 'the uterine'. The article contains a number of references to universality including the earth, humans, 'the world', 'world shaping power' and 'all human identity'. There are fewer references to the specificity of the way wombs are lived in particular contexts. In concluding, Lewis notes: 'Reproduction is geographical in that its material flows and conditions of possibility stretch to the ends of the inhabited earth'. Again in this statement there is a sense of the universal invoked – 'the inhabited earth' – but not the particularities of different wombs in different contexts. Despite this, it seems that Lewis is keen to understand uteruses, in relation to care and social reproduction, in all their spatial and social 'difference'. As she argues, *all* reproduction in some sense is 'assisted', queer, multi-gendered and non-normative. Teasing out the universal and particularities of these cyborg uterine geographies (plural rather than singular) might be a useful future project.

The article also got me thinking about texts of one sort or another that critique, often humorously, the discourse of the ‘good’ mother (goddess). The TV sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* (*Ab Fab*) featuring Jennifer Saunders in the role of Edina, a single, jet-setting, alcohol-swilling, drug-imbibing mother to daughter Saffron springs to mind as an early example of the genre. There are a range of other examples though including other TV comedy series, films, popularist books, websites and blogs (e.g. Long, 2005). Given that a big part of Lewis’s project is about deromanticizing reproduction and that she notes care and social reproduction are tantamount to mothering, ‘bad’ mothers may have something to offer.

To return to where I began, uterine geography (especially one that sides with cyborgs) is arguably central to understandings of the social and the spatial generally but even more so to understandings of care and social reproduction. Lewis has provided readers with a work that it likely to prompt a great deal of thought and reflection. I have appreciated the opportunity to engage with it and look forward to reading some of the ideas contained within this important piece being teased out more fully in research to come.

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Thinking with the uterine

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Abstract

This commentary on Sophie Lewis's essay, 'Cyborg uterine geography: complicating care and social reproduction' considers what a 'uterine geography' could offer for thinking about the body, sex, reproduction, pregnancy, birth, afterbirth, care, pain and love in new ways. While affirming the efforts in the text to generate a more complex, more-than-human and queer account of reproduction, it also raises several questions. How do narratives of maternal–fetal 'violence' or 'generosity' or 'hospitality' work in a broader social and political field, and more generally, how can scientific or evolutionary accounts of bodies be put to critical use in social theory? How does a 'cyborg uterine geography' differ from other feminist accounts of care? What are the possibilities of drawing on the 'uterine' as both a new material and symbolic figure, in the light of recent works that emphasize the potential for thinking feminist politics through the brain, the heart or the gut? And finally, what are the limits of a uterine geography?

Keywords

uterine, reproduction, feminism, pregnancy, body

Sophie Lewis's (2018) essay presents an expansive reading of the literature on pregnancy, birth and parenting in geography and reads these accounts against diverse texts such as Maggie Nelson's memoir *The Argonauts*, the writings of evolutionary biologist Suzanne Sadedin and exemplary accounts of queer family making and DIY gynecology. Lewis also dwells on Bracha Ettinger's concept of the matrixial and the challenge this concept poses to assumptions about kinship, identity and relatedness, as well as the possibilities it offers for reimagining vertical and horizontal relationships. The essay draws on these rich sources and others to stage a dialogue on the disparate ways geographers grapple with the complexities of bodily forms of 'care' and 'social reproduction'. It proposes the novel concept of a 'uterine geography' as a way to, in Lewis's words, bring together 'indigenous midwifery,

surrogacy, underground abortion providers, co-parenting, gamete donation' as well as 'mitochondrial transfers (a new technique yielding "three-parent babies"), shelters for queer homeless people, womb transplants, polymaternalism and "death doulas" in a way that other concepts cannot (Lewis, 2018: 313). The essay asserts the presence of the body as fact and also rhetorical figure in such a forceful and determined way, for there is both an engagement with what could be called a 'materialist' account of the uterus – as tissue, muscle, flesh – and with processual accounts of what the uterine *does*. Lewis refers to this doing as the act of 'holding

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and letting go' and offers a rich and often critical opening up of the uterine to stand in for much more than the individual maternal body, containing (or not) a fetus. There is so much in this essay to engage with, from close readings of work on maternity in geography – and the desire to queer these texts – to accounts of the very real life or death stakes at issue in pregnancy, mothering, giving birth, giving over to another and taking care. In this sense, Lewis' essay speaks eloquently to a diverse set of new feminist geographical approaches to pregnancy, care and reproductive biopolitics (see e.g. Freeman, 2017; McNiven, 2016; Schurr, 2016).

The essay moves from readings of the various recent efforts to theorize social reproduction, the placenta, lively biology, the womb as 'environment', surrogacy, fetal–maternal microchimerism, and parenting cultures, among other subjects to put several arguments to work: First, to challenge geographers to trouble their accounts of (predominantly heterosexual, 'natural') pregnancy as a wholly affirmative life event or experience and become better attuned to the negative and to the estrangement, suffering and pain of pregnancy and birth. Second, to call for attention to the 'uterine' as the locus and site for critical theoretical and empirical interventions that cut across different, often disparate and isolated debates, and to develop a more expansive and critical approach to gestation and all its complexities in those fields where the author suggests much more could be done: theories of the non-human, more-than-human, biopolitics.

Lewis deftly manoeuvres around debates that have preoccupied feminist theorists and philosophers of pregnancy, attempting to put different sources into difficult conversation to 'stay with the trouble' of gestation, citing Haraway's felicitous phrase. The essay is most critical of what Lewis identifies as the tendency to romanticize pregnancy and birth, and although citing some geographical accounts specifically, the romanticization of pregnancy and birth is also conveyed as a broader cultural dynamic. Offered in contrast is the brief description by Suzanne Sadedin, from her perspective as an evolutionary biologist, of the biological 'violence' of birth. Sadedin provides an account 'without a subject' that might seem to speak to

new feminist materialist sensibilities of the contingencies of life. Her focus seems to be on the species rather than individual is the subject of the long time frame of biological mutation, adaptation and selection. But I wondered what precisely this account of pregnancy and birth could say to literatures that seek to offer birth givers a depathologized account of the pregnant and birthing body's capacities for endurance, strength and pleasure? Or of the call to consider the scientific discourse of evolutionary biologists as biopolitical (as one might argue all discourses of reproduction or gestation cannot not be) and therefore implicated far beyond the lab or clinic?

If the aim of Sadedin's work is to demonstrate forcefully the pregnancy can mean death or debility – and that geographers should consider this as a political necessity for expanding critical engagement with pregnancy (brought-to-term, avoided, lost or terminated) – then it would be helpful to also consider how Sadedin's reading of pregnancy also offers a quite familiar account of the maternal/fetal antagonism that underwrites the structural violence aimed at birth givers who don't conform to norms of maternal generosity. This would also entail considering carefully and precisely how characterizing pregnancy in terms of 'generosity' – a term the essay seeks to trouble – might position the bodies of birth givers in different ways in relationship to institutions that enact structural violence on gestating and birthing bodies. Perhaps what the work of maternal generosity also seeks to do rhetorically is counter the characterization of gestation as a naturally unfolding process of competition and antagonism that underwrites all human beginnings, with the caveat that not all acts of generosity, or perhaps better, hospitality, are welcomed or even possible as such (Aristarkhova, 2012). Pregnancy is hardly presented in modern medical contexts as an entirely risk-free process and access to medical expertise can mean life or death. Yet the biological 'facts' Sadedin describes are contested – not in the sense that pre-eclampsia should be described wholly as a 'social construction' – but rather insofar as the model of struggle between gestating body and fetus helps justify particular social dramas and reveals a vision of

humans as species over evolutionary time. Sadedin's account is presented by Lewis as a counterclaim to the presentation of pregnancy as a 'gentle' event and thus to the presumably dominant presentation of the experiences of pregnant people as 'natural'. But I'm not entirely convinced Sadedin's account of maternal–fetal agonism (or antagonism) accounts for what is most violent about pregnancy – or is the most effective way to substantiate Lewis's compelling claims that the site of the uterine and the bodily contingencies of gestation and birth must be made more complex or more sensitive to difference. What work do stories of maternal/fetal 'violence' or 'generosity' or 'hospitality' do in a broader social and political field? Does the uterine trope of 'holding and letting go' effectively circumvent this biopolitical terrain? I am interested in how the essay's intention to bring the undoing and remaking of bodies and subjects at work in gestation might be better accomplished through some accounts – and some concepts – rather than others.

But this is after all a minor point of disagreement with a rich and thoughtful essay that makes a series of convincing claims: that researchers on social reproduction have more to say to theorists of pregnancy, that surrogacy be considered alongside theorizations of the 'maternal', that pregnancy doesn't only occur to those who desire to be pregnant, identify as women or embrace their pregnant state as a pleasurable, life-affirming event. That the body does not always do what one wants it to do is one lesson of gestation and birth. 'What do we do about this?' is as Lewis describes it, the more pressing question. On this subject, I think this essay raises timely questions. It calls for organizing alternative ways of theorizing the biological in relation to the cultural, political–economic and social. In seeking to queer reproduction and to extend the lively and generative debates on hybridity to gestation, it succeeds in making pregnancy and birth, in Nelson's words, 'strange and wild'. This is an effort that tends to get lost in the compartmentalized approach to pregnancy that characterizes much of the theoretical work on maternity, reproduction and the body, to consider any of the myriad sites in which

pregnancy and birth might be empirically and conceptually studied – and this is of course not just a problem for geographers. And there are several instances where the essay raises the possibilities of a 'non-gynocentric gestational politics', for example, in the claim that 'that "uterine" relations are fundamentally cyborg, animatedly laboring, and collectively spatial' (Lewis, 2018: 302).

What does a 'uterine geography' offer for thinking about the body, sex, reproduction, pregnancy, birth, afterbirth, care, pain and love in new ways? There is a conceptual richness to the refrain throughout the essay that the uterine implies 'holding and letting go', recalling Sara Ruddick's articulation of the preservative love of mothering as 'holding', the task of preserving the child's life, as well as Nancy Scheper-Hughes' rejoinder to Ruddick in which mothering under conditions of poverty and disease means 'letting go' (see Ruddick, 1989; Scheper-Hughes, 1993; also O'Reilly and Ruddick, 2009). The essay's call for a non-gynocentric gestational politics of holding and letting go as instances of a 'uterine geography' came through most powerfully in the discussion of the STAR House and GynePunk, where they illustrate how the 'uterine' might be usefully decoupled from a heteronormative and pro-natalist view of pregnancy. But I also want to know more about how the uterine does something, in these and other examples, that 'care' or 'social reproduction' (or the refusal of reproduction) don't do. Is the uterine a metaphor? A material–semiotic assemblage? Something else? Or all of these? The uterine geography presented here seems to recall the efforts to think the body as both the site of sensible difference, that is, at the same time, a transcendental difference operating at the level of the imaginary – where the uterine is something both of and more than the body (on the 'sensible transcendental' see Luce Irigaray, 1993). And despite how much of the essay I enthusiastically agree with, and think will generate debate, I also wonder whether the 'uterine geography' described here needs to be more explicitly conveyed in relation to other conceptual possibilities – is this about including everything about 'holding and letting go' in a single 'uterine' frame? Or about

generating an entirely new way of thinking through disparate subfields of health/feminist/social geography that can take into account a wider framing of what it means to be, or to refuse to be, or to be unable to be ‘reproductive’? I ask these questions because it seems clear that seeking to decouple the uterus as organ from a specific anatomical understanding of the body is viewed as a way to open up political possibilities – as feminist theorists of the brain (Wilson, 2004), gut (Wilson, 2015) and heart (Pollack, 2015) suggest.

The essay calls for geographers to write different stories of the risks and the pain of gestating and giving birth, to accompany those accounts of finding affirmation in one’s body when that body has been viewed as passive, instrumentalized and incapable rather than full of potentiality and possibility. If the uterine is the holding on and letting go that is part of biological–social–ecological contingencies of all kinds, then yes, let us explore and experiment with a uterine geography. If the uterine is another way of thinking with the ‘biological’, then this essay persuades me that we do not know precisely what this biology is... yet! Lewis thus suggests an urgent and important task: to find generative and more complex ways to think the body anew.

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Uterine imaginaries, geopolitical economy, and the maternal/unconscious

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Abstract

This commentary brings geopolitical economic sensibilities about sexual difference, possession, and the Machine into conversation with Lewis' cyborgic uterine to make three analytical points. First, transcalar uterine thinking has long existed, seasoned by geopolitical economic circumstance. Uterine thinking in nonmechanized agrarian contexts has circulated primarily through imaginaries of maternal fertility, the material expanse of which exceeds the limits of biological mother and child. The Machine gained authority over the agrarian by feeding off, and replacing, the maternal, of which the uterine is only part. By addressing geopolitical economic difference, Lewis's analysis would be enriched by an abundance of gestational thinking that operates beyond the Machinic cyborg. My second and related analytical point has to do with how Lewis locates the uterine as a gestational prize that anyone should be able to have; as long as the uterus remains rooted in sexual dimorphism, the male-born body is potentially unfree. Thus, even as she speaks of how gestation need not be contained by a real uterus, she considers its absence in the biological male body a source of potential deprivation that, for freedom's sake, would best be undone. This undoing would limit the geographical possibilities for queering the maternal. My third point emerges out of the second and has to do with how unconscious desire has historically geographically depended on sexual dimorphism, not the uterus. I'm not sure, but it seems that the interiorized cast of Lewis' cyborgic uterine makes it difficult to theorize relational attachments—her 'holding and letting go'.

Keywords

geopolitical economy, Machinic cyborg, maternal/unconscious, queering the maternal, sexual difference, transcalar uterine imaginaries

In Aldous Huxley's *Brave new world* (1931), human conception, gestation, delivery, and infancy take place in a centralized and scientifically controlled Hatchery and Conditioning Centre where specially trained workers carry out specific bio-assemblage tasks. Labor starts in the Fertilizing Room where workers inseminate and biogenetically stress harvested ova to induce replication, a mechanism

developed to promote social stability. Bottlers, Liners, and Matriculators subsequently place each

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ovum in a vessel lined with sow peritoneum, fill the bottle with a vitalizing solution, label it by date and replicate group. Once accumulated, these are put on a cart and wheeled to the Social Predestination Room to be placed on a conveyor belt and hived into different groups, each one subjected to distinct temperature–pressure conditions and specially titrated hormonal and oxygen levels to create classes of humans having intelligence levels and physical abilities tailored to future tasks. After the infants are born (decanted), they will live for months in laboratories, separated by class, to be further psychologically conditioned to like the work assigned to them.

Huxley’s scenario illustrates the kind of transcalar uterine thinking that has shaped speculative science fiction, a genre that expanded after the 1970s, spurred by futuristic anxieties centered on the Machine—a device for subsuming the maternal. Huxley’s vision shows how, even 100 years ago, the Machine was being imagined as having the capacity to become so efficient that it would take on reproduction—biological and social. These anxieties lay, of course, in the centrality of the Machine to mercantilism and industrial capitalism, political economies arguably impelled by masculinist desires to ontologize and organize private property into a schema of value from which human relationality and the biological maternal could be abstracted, commodified, and possessed. As the most powerful incarnation and reproducer of private property, the Machine (of which the cyborg is part) became central to an ontology that linked (masculine) generativity to possession (Nast, 2015, 2017, 2018).

This commentary brings these and other geopolitical economic ideas about the Machine into conversation with Lewis’ uterine imaginings to make three analytical points. First, transcalar uterine thinking has long existed, seasoned by political economic circumstance. Uterine thinking in nonmechanized agrarian contexts has circulated primarily through imaginaries of maternal fertility, the expanse of which exceeds the limits of biological mother and child. The Machine gained authority over the agrarian by feeding off, and replacing, the maternal, of which the uterine was part. By incorporating geopolitical economic difference, Lewis’s analysis would be enriched by an abundance of transcalar gestational

thinking that operates beyond the Machinic cyborg. My second and related analytical point has to do with how Lewis locates the uterine as a gestational prize that anyone should be able to have; for, as long as the uterus remains rooted in sexual dimorphism, the male-born body is unfree. Thus, even though she speaks of how gestation need not be contained by a real uterus, she considers its absence in the biological male body a source of potential deprivation that, for freedom’s sake, must be undone. This undoing limits the *geographical* possibilities of maternal thinking, of which the uterine is part. My third point emerges out of the second and has to do with how unconscious desire has historically geographically depended on sexual dimorphism, not the uterus. I’m not sure, but it seems that the interiorized cast of the cyborgic uterine makes it difficult to theorize relational attachments—her ‘holding and letting go’.

Transcalar uterine thinking and the Machine

In *Wombs and alien spirits*, anthropologist Janice Boddy documents the importance of uterine thinking among the agrarian Hofriyati who live along the Southern Sudanic Nile. For them, the uterine holds important associations with defense, its interiority shielding life from malevolent spirits outside. Working ethnographically in the mid- to late-1970s, Boddy (1989) concludes that Hofriyati women practiced and valued labial excision and suture (infibulation) because they saw it as heightening uterine defenses and creating a desexed body that pronounced the primacy of motherhood over gender. This spatial logic extended fractally outward across the circular shapes and defensive ingresses of Hofriyati homes, courtyards, and settlements, malevolence itself mediated by changing political and economic circumstances, including those of colonialism. The exigencies and abilities of defense weakened with globalization, the expanding geography of social and economic intercourse making the maternal–spatial logic of infibulated enclosure less available and compelling.

Most agrarian uterine imaginaries, however, are less defended, supporting relationalities of life *and*

death. That which had perhaps the greatest historical geographical reach operated for hundreds of years through the cowry, a seashell found and used across Africa and Asia as a form of currency *because* it resembled the uterus and vulva. Prior to its co-optation by European slave traders, the fecundity of the cowry circulated polyvalently through economic transactions (monetary currency), burial practices (spiritual currency paid by the dead to enter the ancestral hereafter), and pregnancy (fertility currency worn to invoke life), the logic of fertility drawing on but far exceeding the living and the human. The uterine also shaped the Iron Age. Most notably, certain Iron Age smelting facilities in West Africa were built in the shape of a woman: Breasts above and, below, a vaginal passageway that carried ore and slag to the outside. The use of smelted iron ingots as monetary currency undoubtedly came from the fertility logic of iron-making, iron expanding the possibilities of farming *and* war. Iron Age stone saunas of the Iberian Peninsula were likewise uterine by design. Carved out of stone, naked users exited the womb-shaped interiors one by one, descending head first on their backs, through a narrow downward-directed passageway, the sauna's condensation lubricating their departure (Couto-Ferreira and Verderame, 2018). These and other uterine considerations were not unusual, but part of relational ontologies that worked through, but always exceeded, the sexual dimorphism of the human. Indeed, gestation often translated as couplings: warp and weft giving life to cloth, hand and drum birthing sound, mortar and pestle making food. Sex and its manifestations was much less gender-regulated than in other contexts, particularly industrial capitalism (e.g. Achebe, 2011; Oyěwùmí, 2016).

While it could be argued that Lewis does not address such examples because she is not theoretically invested in the nonwestern or agrarian, it does not explain why she skips over SFF which, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Huxley's *Brave new world* to Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy and beyond, has used the uterine cyborgic to think about, at least in part, the reproductive contradictions of the Machine from which the cyborg was

born (Federmayer, 2000; Sherman, 2017; Stratman, 2015).

Uterine contractions and the geographical problem of interiority

While uterine imaginaries of life still exist, the majority contracted in ontological, biological, and sociospatial reach through the sexed competitive workings of the Machine. For brevity sake, I examine this competition spatially, mapping out a contradictory cyborgic uterine regime that transatlantic slave trading, empire building, and industrial capitalism made possible. In so doing, I resituate Lewis' cyborgic uterine cynically to problematize cyborgic logics and investments.

One of the most dramatic uterine contradictions has to do with how the Machine geographically and bodily instrumentalized the African maternal, evident in the premium slave owners paid for young slave men. The slave woman cost less for accountancy reasons: the few days that a pregnant slave woman was released from work to give birth were considered a dead economic loss; so, too, was the child she produced, at least for the first few years when it could not be put to profitable work. By default, the geographical ideal became for the *continental* African uterine to absorb maternal costs. The spatialized uterine contradictions help account for the huge geographical disparities of wealth and fertility that ensued and have since been analyzed in non-maternal terms as uneven development.

With colonization and industrial capitalism, the uterine in colonies worldwide was again put to work offshore generating the racialized child, this time for the purposes of building, farming, and extracting resources in situ, further changing how gestation was locally understood and managed (e.g. Thomas, 2003). By contrast, the Machine became the prize and exclusive geographical preserve of industrial man and nation, its superior productivity and force becoming the single most important prosthetic of racial supremacy and the racially vaunted masculine. The sexed competitive logic of the Machine came from the fact that it replaces mother *and* child, its generativity producing commodity kinds at ever-greater levels of efficiency. Except for short postwar

baby booms, total fertility rates in industrial nations consistently declined, rates in the (nonMachinic) colonies remaining relatively high, sustained by gestational imaginaries more uterine than cyborg.

The *geographical* contradictions between uterine and Machinic imaginaries would shape shift with the deindustrialization that followed from the 1973 oil crisis and precipitated the rise of finance capitalism. Centuries of undercapitalization that had placed the agrarian maternal at the center of uterine imaginaries, had also effected large impoverished rural populations that states could now use to attract unprecedented levels of foreign direct investment into thousands of industry-centered export-processing zones, worldwide. Here, female labor was often preferred and pregnancy guarded against (e.g. Wright, 2006). And so the Machine became an instrument of racial insult rather than privilege while the maternal privileged by finance capitalism became exceptional, mother and child striated by cyborgic plasticity, commodification, and choice; subsidized by an evacuation of the agrarian maternal. By 2015, most industrial nation-states had below-replacement fertility rates, including China (which made fertility decline part of its industrialization strategy), this requiring the making of marketing into an industrial science for driving commodity desires every more finely into privileged bodies increasingly freed from reproduction.

The cyborgic privilege on which Lewis relies seems, therefore, to be based on uterine–Machinic contradictions that, if theorized, might complicate her idealization of the cyborgic *and* labor against what dos Santos (2016) has referred to as epistemicide. Mining the cyborg for its specific financial–emotional investments would additionally bring masculinist circuits of sexed competition with, and possession of, the maternal into greater theoretical play.

I want to end, then, by questioning Lewis' metaphorical privileging of the uterus, which elides the evolutionary weight and armature of the biologically integral maternal. More than the uterus, the biological maternal has much to say about how planetary life can be *geographically* and corporeally queered and opens up Lewis' embrace of the cyborgic to other gestational body parts, such as the belly

and breast (Nast, 2005, 2018). Considering how the maternal speaks gestationally otherwise would connect those invested in anti-capitalist pursuits from across a greater geopolitical economic range (Floriano et al., 2013).

The maternal/unconscious

Uterine contractions are autonomic, not unlike the contractions of the stomach, heart, and lungs. Moreover, the uterus is an enclosure, however many bodily portals there are between it and the outside world. While environmentally transactional, the womb is not where emotions and relational attachments lie. These begin with the physical trauma of birth and the profoundly extensive period of human infant helplessness. Unlike other animals, the human infant can only survive by calling out to a (m)other. The continuity and dyadic nature of call-and-response consolidates *and* divides the psyche, precipitating lifelong struggles related to holding and letting go. The spatial–bodily vicissitudes of maternal–child anxiety, longing, and desire are extra-uterinely dyadic, a twosome that, according to Lacan, later produces retrospective nostalgia for the womb (c.f. Solomon, 2017).

Lewis' metaphorical reliance on the uterus is perhaps why she casts Haraway's injunction that we make kin, not babies, as Malthusian. I would instead venture that Haraway is at least partly nodding to a kind of *geographical* queering of the maternal, even if she locates relational desire and struggle beyond the unconscious, (m)otherwise (Nast, 2017; e.g. Witten, 2017).

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A comradely politics of gestational work: Militant particularism, sympoetic scholarship and the limits of generosity

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Abstract

In response to the four commentaries on ‘Cyborg uterine geography’, in which I argued normatively for reorganizing gestation on the basis of comradeliness, I grapple with three overlapping conceptual areas highlighted: the ethical and political affordances of the term ‘generosity’ in relation to care and pregnancy; the methodological question of bringing insights from the uterine field of ‘sympoeisis’ (‘making-with’, Haraway (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.) into the practice of scholarship; and the desire for more place-based specificity in the mapping of uterine geographies (plural, rather than singular; ‘normal’, as well as ‘queer’). Throughout this reply, I tie my remarks back to the core framework I advance in my piece, of gestation being work which, as such, has no predetermined gender, is subject to transformation through struggle, should not be romanticized (for instance, by identifying it with ‘the biological maternal’). Firstly, I rethink what it means to valorize gestational relationality in terms of generousness, from an antiwork perspective. Secondly, I engage the question, ‘can uterine geographies also create a methodology of engagement?’ while seeking to qualify the proposed embrace of ‘indeterminacy’. Thirdly, I respond to concerns about the ‘universality’ in my piece by considering some contemporary examples of uterine politicization, specifically around abortion, that suggest to me that specificity has served as the matrix through which a ‘militant particularism’ (Harvey and Williams (1995) *Militant particularism and global ambition. Social Text* 42(Spring): 69–98.) can emerge in the form of geographically far-flung Reproductive Justice solidarities.

Keywords

abortion, antiwork, generosity, indeterminacy, queer geographies

Uterine geographers

Robyn Longhurst, Heidi Nast, Kath Browne and Maria Fannin’s reflections honour me and thicken geography’s sense of itself as responsible to the sticky labour of anthropogenesis. To foreground a few

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salient elements of what else was said: Longhurst is sceptical of my claim that feminist geographers lack an active verb to describe the work of being pregnant and doubts that the verb ‘to gestate’ is it, noting that the pregnant women she has interviewed did not talk about ‘gestating’. Browne feels that while I assert ‘a normal prosthesis-free family does not exist’, my actual illustrations don’t seem to ‘queer “normal”’ because they involve (exclusively) ‘trans-communalities’. Meanwhile, Fannin takes issue with my strategy of adopting biologist Suzanne Sadedin’s agonistic, anti-generosity narration of pregnancy as a way of advancing those aims. Pregnancy, I am reminded, is ‘hardly presented in modern medical contexts as an entirely risk-free process’. Far from iconoclastic, the basic tenets of the ‘war in the womb’ story are actually ‘overfamiliar’ and – Fannin argues – have to be understood as complicit in ongoing ‘structural violence aimed at [some] birth givers’ in the broader social and political field. In other words: I should at minimum have prolonged my attack on the demonization of pregnancy if I was going to focus so much criticism on its romanticization (I address this point in-depth in the next section).

Heidi Nast, for her part, reacts passionately against my (antiwork) approach of articulating gestational labour qua work. In the first instance Nast is, as she indicates, entirely opposed to the cyborg, Donna Haraway’s dialectic figuration of colonized embodiment, which Nast (mis)reads instead as an impossible fusion of opposites. Nast is clearly unpersuaded by my case for looking at the cyborgicity of uterine labour relationality (i.e. its imbricatedness with ecology, animality, racial techno-capital and imperialism, as well as its immanent potential for anti-colonial postgender proletarian resistance). Indeed, Nast argues that such relationality doesn’t exist prepartum. For me, this is not about fetal subjecthood (which I, too, reject) but about how looking at gestational work – its distributedness and mixity, its part-conscious and part-‘autonomic’ character – helps us understand something about labour more generally. That is, looking at the sociobiological matrix of the uterine (not ‘the biological maternal’) helps us dissolve the putative opposition between production and reproduction. In contrast, Nast reaffirms the importance

of this orthodox opposition between female productive labour and female reproductive labour (‘female labor . . . [as opposed to] pregnancy’). Like the romantic (and, I would argue, structurally transphobic) dichotomy of ‘the Machine’ and ‘the maternal’ on which her analysis persistently rests, this opposition is one I consider to uncritically accept capitalism’s abstraction of labour to time. Unsurprisingly, it eats itself anyway, with Nast ultimately treating the creativity of pregnancy as a demographer might: as mechanical productivity.

As we do labour, labour does us back. As Longhurst hopefully perceives, the purpose of my use of abstruse language like ‘metramorphosis’ and ‘sym-poetic’ is to get at that uncanny dynamic in pregnancy, which eludes a subject/object division. I am convinced of the insufficiency of the commonplaces at our disposal – formulations like ‘to be with child’, ‘to be expecting’ and ‘to have children’, which circle around the exterior of the gestating body and conceal its creativity. Even ‘to be pregnant’ only credits the condition passively to the actor who, having failed to be ‘impregnable’, was ‘impregnated’. The risk Longhurst identifies is that we erect, in language, a sovereign subject of gestation that, for some gestators, simply feels like a lie. Yet *some* gestators do call what they are doing *gestating* and, for me, politically, that’s enough. Besides, the word ‘gestate’ once denoted horse-riding! *Gest* or *geste* in Old French meant ‘famous deed or exploit’ (as in: *chansons de geste*). So, to *geste*-ate evokes to me a metalevel of action, a doing of doings or saddling of exploits and exploitations, where the fetus participates in the *gesture*.

It’s true that, far more than mine, Robyn Longhurst’s studies of everyday corporeal boundary trouble do a great job of ‘queering normal’. I did not look, as I could have done, at the weirdness and excess of the British Royal Family’s choreography of its members’ gestational labours (this is the subject of photographer Natalie Lennard’s series *Birth Undisturbed*, 2017). Rather, I looked to the circumstances of Maggie Nelson’s pregnancy and to the domestic mothering practices of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha Johnson as my key inspirations for ‘Cyborg uterine geography’. But, thinking back, I didn’t choose those examples because they were or weren’t ‘normal’. Rather, I chose them because they

were *normatively* appealing to me: they were comradely. I take Browne's point, however, and I will turn presently to a case of a heterosexual marriage in which the biochemical aggressions of a septic miscarriage, combined with the violence of an anti-feminist juridical system, hold the entrails of a would-be mother prisoner and fail to let them go.

Fannin asks whether 'the uterine' for me is primarily a heuristic metaphor intended to allow social reproduction theorists to include 'everything about "holding and letting go" in a single "uterine" frame' – or, alternatively, a material–semiotic assemblage whose literal referent is a 'biology' that I myself persuade her isn't actually known to us '... yet!' Perversely enough, I absolutely loved this deft problematization, despite not knowing quite how to answer it (... yet!). I keenly appreciate how it lays bare a number of the contradictions and latencies in my articulation of the matter. While I prepare to re-gestate all this via the intellectual multi-placenta that is this forum, I can only say, somewhat ruefully, that Fannin is right: I believe I mean 'all of the above'.

Agonism in/or generosity?

Fannin's powerful problematization of my critique of 'generosity' narratives demands far more extensive treatment than what I'll begin to offer here. Unlike gestating, the word 'generous' historically denoted a passive ontological state, namely, the condition of being 'of noble birth' (from the Latin *genus*, as in *genesis* and *pro-genitor*). Generosity was essentially *noblesse oblige*. That is, the word's senses of unselfishness and bounty – effectively their only senses today – originally stemmed from these virtues' close association with elite 'race or stock'. In reality, of course, it is reliably the precarious *lower* classes in society who turn out to practice the most charity. But the concept of generosity, in its very construction, still reflects the injustices of a class society that disproportionately recognizes the beneficence of the moneyed, high-born, celebrated and pedigreed. As Fannin's questions remind me, Rosalyn Diprose knows this all too well. In *Corporeal Generosity*, Diprose illustrates the paradox whereby, in order to demonstrate generosity (as opposed to selflessness) one has to be recognized as individually

self-possessed and sovereign; yet to even be recognized as such in the first place, a feminine subject has to first demonstrate generosity. Received models of generosity are raced and gendered, such that some of us 'seem to be incapable of giving anything except that which already belongs to someone else or that which must be extracted by force' (2002: 56).

While unsparingly demolishing both the contractual and the moral–volitional models of generosity, Diprose still insists on a third, liberatory version. An emancipatory generosity, she avers, 'is not the expenditure of one's possession but the dispossession of oneself, the being-given to others that undercuts any self-contained ego' (2002: 4). It is essentially *this* radical generosity that Myra Hird takes up, too, in her theorization of the corporeality of pregnancy in terms of 'impetuosity, recklessness' (2007: 5), 'excess, unknowability and openness' (9). It signifies a constitutive openness to the other that doesn't have to be accepted, received or even recognized in order to matter (in fact, it often goes 'unanticipated and unrecognized'; Hird, 2007: 6). It brings to mind Maggie Nelson's willingness 'to go to pieces' (2015: 134). Hird visits touchstone texts of feminism that revile the parasitism of the fetus; but clearly maintains, with Diprose, that even the unconscious and unwilling dynamics of gestating can be usefully framed in terms of gifting and generosity.

Fannin asks that I consider the possibility that the rhetoric of maternal generosity 'counter[s] the characterisation of gestation as a naturally unfolding process of competition and antagonism that underwrites all human beginnings'. My doubts persist, as follows: Can a coerced, parasited generosity militate against those damaging naturalizing characterizations of labour? Can a victim, a technology, be meaningfully generous? Can workers be truly hospitable, under capitalism? Fannin mentions the 'caveat' that acts of generosity or hospitality are not always welcomed or possible. This, for me, is absolutely key. I submit that adopting an alternative topos – such as comradeship – might enable us to better frame the politics of the strange combination of activeness, passivity, automation, intention, refusal, extraction, parasitism, care and violence at the placental interface. When I gestate, the question for me is how to be a *comradely* cohabitant and

adversary and nurse and environment and even competitor to my fetus(es), all at once.

The putative novelty of modern ‘infertility solutions’ inheres precisely in their partial evacuation of the whole question of generosity, of motherliness, from the labour of gestating. It is tempting, as a feminist academic, to seek to simply reverse this denial of generosity in the name of valorizing and making it visible, by analogy with motherhood. But is generosity, or exploitation, the truer representation of gestational service’s horizons? It is worth recalling that Angela Davis didn’t think the so-called New Reproductive Technologies were all that ‘new’: Hadn’t Black women long served as surrogates on the American plantation (Davis, 1998)? Put another way: an enslaved person *cannot* be meaningfully generous; it is politically irresponsible to valorize her generosity. But comradeship is different. While motherhood in the United States was elaborated as an institution of married White womanhood, Black slaves could make no claim of kinship or property to the fruits of their gestational labours. They could, however, be *comradely* to those infants. To this day, these fundamental racial and class dynamics continue to trouble the commonplace certainty (*mater semper certa est*) that gestation ‘naturally’ produces the status of motherhood for the gestator in the United States.

This raises the question of whether it *should*: Whether motherhood and pregnancy per se are viable cornerstones – as Nast assumes they are – of a liveable world. Orna Donath highlights that there is an epidemic of ‘regretting motherhood’ in the Western world (Donath, 2017). Erica Millar documents how abortions are overwhelmingly *happy* experiences (Millar, 2017). Yet hegemonic culture remains as natalist and repro-normative as ever, and the infertility industry, throwing every last resource at the achievement of individual pregnancies, shores up the desire for a biogenetic babe-of-one’s-own under the guise of catering to it. On the other hand, radicals such as Alexis Pauline Gumbs are reviving traditions of ‘polymaternalism’ (where each child has many mothers, of whatever gender) as evidence of the ‘queerness’ and communistic anti-propertarianism of some long-standing Black kinship practices (Gumbs et al., 2016; Lewis, 2018). Doing away with

parental possessiveness, fostering a comradeship relation between adults and children instead: This was the arc of 1970s gay liberation’s politics of family abolition. It’s the key point of much of the speculative science fiction Nast notices me ‘skipping over’ in this particular piece: For instance, Marge Piercy’s vision of a society that has automated gestation and communized child-rearing (‘kid-binding’) in *Woman on the Edge of Time* (Piercy, 1983). And it was, of course, the oft-forgotten crux of Shulamith Firestone’s idiosyncratic proposals in *The Dialectic of Sex* (Firestone, 2015). It is clear from Donath’s accounts that one can be comradeship in a situation characterized, among other things, by regret and antagonism – most mothers manage to be so at least some of the time – even as your fetus ‘runs you over like a truck’ (Nelson, 2015: 134). As the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers proclaimed, children ‘will not belong to the patriarchy. They will not belong to us either. They will belong only to themselves’.

Sympoetic methods

Children are at stake to *all of us* because we all shape and make them (even while they, as well as everyone else, are doing the same for, to and through us). The term sympoesis (*making-with*) is an attempt to summarize this core characteristic of social reproduction, understood as a matrix of co-creative and co-destructive labour. Writing is sympoetic: While the name on the byline of the article is mine, the various mutually incompatible thoughts that gestated its contents, like the labours that gestated (all the way into adulthood) the thinkers of those ongoing thoughts, are many. Mario Biagioli puts it well in his essay comparing gestational surrogacy with intellectual plagiarism: ‘authorship can only be coauthorship’ (2014: 84). Sympoesis can be a curse as well as a blessing. While the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers espoused a commoning, communizing politics in relation to children, it is perfectly possible to remove those determinations from the idea of sympoesis, anchoring it instead to fascist values or to the thoroughgoing ‘indeterminacy’ to which Kath Browne is committed.

I have struggled to understand what differentiates Browne’s caution that ‘it is in the collective, and particularly societal responsibility for uterine values,

that unwelcome interventions and restrictions can lie' from a rejection of the problem of politics per se – the problem of living with and through others. Asks Browne: 'Can uterine geographies also create a methodology of engagement based in indeterminacy?' When I said that the relationship between feminist struggle and the uterus 'should be treated as open to determination' I also meant that it should be (re)determined. My noting that, in Myra Hird's pro-generosity approach, 'the relational result of gestation is normatively determinate', was not a critique of her normativity per se but of its not going far enough: Hird presumes that production by gestation of a mother–baby bond is a good thing, just by itself. I wanted to pose the question of *which bonds?* (as well as answering it: comradely ones, not *necessarily* involving the gestator in any particularly privileged way).

Robyn Longhurst writes that she is 'not entirely sure how focusing on the uterus might help to ensure that more non-normative accounts of care and social reproduction emerge'. Again, I do not seek to foster merely 'non-normative' accounts in my community. My account is intensely normative. This divergence explains why Longhurst brings up the abusive and filthy-rich Londoner Edina (from *Ab Fab*) in the context of my call to 'deromanticize'. Longhurst puts the 'bad' in 'bad mothers' in scare quotes and suggests that such figures, or their representation in popular culture, 'may have something to offer'. While I laugh heartily at (and with) Edina, the point I was attempting to make was that bad mothers – abusive, exploitative, policing, bourgeois, phobic, violent mothers, sans scare quotes – are a real political problem. It is understandable that leftists and feminists should focus all their energies on defending mothers (especially single, teen, working-class, migrant, addicted, incarcerated, welfare-recipient mothers) from the charge of 'bad mother'. I don't for one second suggest that the effort to combat their institutional ill-treatment and humiliation should stop; rather, I insist we can oppose capitalist anti-mother policy without falling into pro-motherhood. Focusing on the uterus in such a way as to centre the goal of family abolition (which includes motherhood abolition) – and what Treva Ellison calls 'trans reproductive labour' (Ellison, 2017) – is a strategy intended to immanently

carry forward the sense in which pregnancy will be, albeit bloody, also latently anti-capitalist.

I can see Browne is being fair when she points out 'it is a stretch' for me to have suggested radical geographers 'collude' in mistaking pregnancy for what Maggie Nelson calls 'the ultimate conformity' or that they've not been interested in mapping the uterine. I wonder if I myself mistook pregnancy for the ultimate conformity for some time – and projected my shortcomings onto a discipline that is in fact full of unruly corporeographies! While I disagree (as will be clear from the above discussion) with Browne's implication that thinking with the uterus could easily be made to 'rework our [scholarly] engagements with each other' in such a way that academia would become more *generous* rather than less, the point is well-taken that a call to commit to a comradely 'holding and letting go' should practice what it preaches. Browne reminds me that 'these authors, academics and people have laid the groundwork'. I agree; and to the extent that my critique became 'chastisement' I fell short of the norms of sympoetic scholarship to which I aspire.

Militant particulars

Robyn Longhurst indicates that she would like to see more attention to 'the specificity of the way wombs are lived in particular contexts'. The wish for a 'militant particularism' (Harvey and Williams, 1995) – albeit difficult – is undoubtedly the right line of inquiry. Clearly, geographies dictate important things like whether gestation can be opted out of (e.g. the local culture around abortion, the quality and accessibility of healthcare provisioning, and law), even if these contexts do not predict the phenomenological experience of pregnancy in a consistent way. Some gestators feel, like Sylvia Plath, that 'a black force [is] blotting out my brain and utterly possessing me' (Plath, 2001); while others breezily refer to themselves as 'an Easy-Bake oven' (Kuczynski, 2008). The difficulty stems from a near-unique peculiarity of gestational labour, which is that both upper-class and lower-class, Black and non-Black, settler and indigenous, propertied and homeless people do it (and feel wildly idiosyncratic things about it). I've read many ethnographies of

commercial gestational workplaces – in various locales in Mexico and India – and even there, within one dormitory, the diversity and specificity of gestational experience proves really difficult to condense (Deomampo, 2016; Schurr and Militz, 2018). I'd still defend the value of a singular (normative) political intervention, but wholeheartedly support the commitment called for, to 'teasing out the universal and particularities of these cyborg uterine geographies (plural rather than singular)'.

I will speak to two particularities of the cyborg uterine political landscape. Some readers of *Dialogues in Human Geography* surely felt the same shivers up their spine I felt, watching footage of crowds in Dublin chanting 'Savita, Savita' in the aftermath of the referendum on abortion held in Ireland on 27 May, 2018. The case has served – continues to serve – both as a tragic memorial and as the luminous catalyst for freer uterine geographies worldwide. Savita Halappanavar, a 31-year-old dentist, was directly killed by the Irish medico-legal establishment in 2012 as a result of being denied life-saving healthcare in the 17th week of her gestation. Her dead, though only partially miscarried fetus, which had gone septic, was legally entitled to better treatment in medical terms than was Dr Halappanavar herself – that is, it could not be removed from her – until it was too late. The vividness with which the murder rammed home the sadism of a situation of forced gestation was undoubtedly one of the factors that inspired the overwhelmingly trans-inclusive and working-class-led Irish feminist movement to push so tirelessly for the last 5 years, ensuring abortion was at long last decriminalized. From my perspective, too, the consequences of rebuffing Savita's request for an abortion highlight my article's contentions that: all reproduction is assisted; 'labour does you'; and the freedom to stop working whenever we wish is vital – even when it comes to the work of making babies who will die when we stop. Across the board, workers deserve to be rescued from their work when – as it was for Halappanavar, whose body was undertaking the process of miscarriage with lethal slowness – it is going gruesomely awry.

Since moving to the United States, where rates of death caused by gestation are about the worst in the 'developed' world, I've been acutely aware of living

in a gestational dystopia far more banal than anything envisioned in the bioconservative dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* or its television adaptation. One-hundred fifty years since chattel slavery was formally ended in the United States, Black gestators are still three to four times more likely than White ones to die from pregnancy. This social environment – what I think we should be calling the stratified infrastructure of forced gestation – sustains itself not only thanks to racism and classism but also thanks to medical rules near-identical to those that killed Savita Halappanavar. These rules restrict what doctors in many parts of the United States can do to the 'motherfetus' organism (I take this phrase from Chikako Takeshita, 2017), dictating on pain of disbarment what must be said and done to pregnant patients, via guidelines that essentially suspend pregnant people's personhood. The priority of the so-called 'fetal personhood' is an obsession that even extends to the so-called 'preemies': fetuses who have exited the womb prematurely. It was in Philadelphia, my adoptive city, that lambs were gestated to term in ectogenetic 'bio-bags' last year in one of many experiments geared towards saving human 'preemies' (and certainly not towards the end of liberating human adults from the need to do gestational work). The very suggestion that a preference among adults – simply, to have kids but not ever get pregnant – might be sufficient justification for researching such technology is downright reviled. Female commissioning parents who hire surrogates without being 'infertile' are derided with astonishing virulence for their 'vanity'. Yet, as Arwa Mahdawi crisply attests, 'there doesn't seem to be such a stigma in [cis] men saying that there is no way they'd ever want to be pregnant' (Mahdawi, 2018).

There is cause for hope, though, since inspiration has flowed abundantly across the ocean after the overwhelming vote to repeal the 8th Amendment. In North America, the Reproductive Justice movement is gaining momentum, with radical 'full-spectrum' doulas (who assist not only birthing but dying, miscarriage and abortion) accelerating the charge to defend Medicare from Trumpian attacks (SisterSong, 2018). Left feminists in my state are organizing to expose and drive out the plague of 'Crisis Pregnancy Centers': anti-abortion missions dressed up to look

medical. Increasingly, these efforts are framed in trans-inclusive language, conceptualized by and in solidarity with transgender people. On this point, much of academia does (genuinely!) lag behind. ‘While acknowledgement that not all women are mothers is fairly commonplace, the fact that not all pregnant or potentially pregnant persons are mothers or women has yet to transform our language and conceptual frames substantively’ (Takeshita, 2017). If it is ‘chastising’ to say that heel-dragging on the part of ‘sceptics’ in my camp is doing us all harm, so be it. In her otherwise excellent *Happy Abortions*, Erica Millar asks doubtfully whether it is ‘possible or desirable’ to envisage a gender-neutral subject of pregnancy (Millar, 2017: 4). History is already overtaking her, with major medical institutions tweaking their obstetric policies (British Medical Association, 2017). *Happy Abortions* powerfully transforms our conceptual frames, showing that pregnant people ‘are not automatically mothers’. Couldn’t it therefore also help us see they aren’t automatically women, either? To do so would not rob feminist struggle of its constituency; quite the contrary. It would enable us to better notice how all of those roles (mothering, being a woman, gestating) involve partially unconscious, not readily interruptible work which can –with a little help from one’s comrades – be refused and/or redistributed.

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