

# Another Pregnancy is Possible: Making Surrogacy Unthinkable (by Universalising Surrogacy)<sup>1</sup>

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This is a plea for speculative attention to what I propose we frame as the *problem* of human pregnancy. There is a real need for new discourses, artworks and fabulations that make visible how weird it is that, as a society, we do not generally organize research into ways to potentially alleviate the obvious problem, which is that – as Shulamith Firestone put it succinctly in 1970 – pregnancy “isn’t good for you” (Firestone 1970: 198). Notwithstanding the pleasure that many people take in the experience, gestating a human fetus is a form of labour that claims the lives of an estimated 300,000 adults every year, which is about a seventh of the number of people the International Labour Organization estimates succumb annually to “work-related accidents or diseases.”<sup>2</sup> Why, then, is it unremarkable for a person with a potentially implantable uterus to walk around *sans* contraceptive pill, *sans* IUD? Why is it acceptable for societies *not* to invest every possible resource into minimizing the dangers pregnancy poses to those who are pregnant? Why is experimental development of ectogenetic (artificial womb) devices such as the “BioBag,” proven so far on fetal sheep, justified only in terms of saving “preemies”? The fact that it is thinkable to ask (or expect) a person to do pregnancy at all, let alone for significantly less than \$1 an hour, ought to stun us.

The new global trend towards commercial “surrogacy” does less than nothing to address the problem of pregnancy. If anything, with its tendency to subject waged gestators to risky multiple-embryo transfers, it intensifies it. Ges-

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2 International Labour Organization, World Statistic: “The enormous burden of poor working conditions”, 15 November, 2015.

tational surrogates are pregnancy contractors who work in an industrial sector often misleadingly referred to as “Assisted Reproduction” (as though reproduction were ever unassisted!): they are discursively positioned as the technology component of the service we call “assisted reproductive technology.” They are enlisted as pure *techné* – uncreative muscle – for it is the genetic commissioners who are paying for the privilege of “authorship.” In general, even while *on* the job, surrogacy workers don’t receive meaningful healthcare benefits, i.e., ones that aren’t simply about safeguarding the fetus – albeit the distinction is blurry, given that a fetus is a part of a gestator’s body. What is crystal clear is that capitalist “infertility solutions” have little to do with refusals by some fractions of the population in the Global North to do gestational labour. Rather, they represent a response to a market demand for genetic parenthood. Pregnancy work is not so much disappearing or getting easier as being outsourced: crashing through various regulatory barriers onto an open market. As ever, capitalism is not solving the problem, only moving it around. Let the poor do the dirty work, wherever they are cheapest (or most convenient) to enrol.

And no wonder, given that the ground for such a development was already being laid as early as the late nineteenth century, when large swathes of the colonial, upper-class, frequently women-led eugenics movement in Europe and North America argued that the best way to realize pregnancy’s promise – namely, a thriving future “race” achieved through sexual “virtue” and white-supremacist “hygiene” – was for the state to economically discipline all sexual activity uncondusive to that horizon.<sup>3</sup> As good social democrats, these “feminist” progressives wanted a nation-state that was duty-bound to feed, shelter, clothe, educate, and train the gestational labourers present within its territory, and (especially) the products of that gestational labor. Since this was then, and remains now, a costly sounding proposition, a set of enduring ideas and policies were propagated around the turn of the century, according to which, as far as metropolitan proletarians were concerned, having babies spells financial irresponsibility and surefire ruin in and of itself – especially out of wedlock. The same discouragement applied, more or less, to nonwhite (Italian, Irish, Arab) immigrants on the eastern American seaboard, with Black, Latinx, disabled and otherwise “unfit” populations suffering the brunt of sterilization drives – a practice which continues to this day in US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice) detention centers (The Guardian 2020). Lumpenproletarian populations in “the colonies” (notably India) were first

3 On eugenic feminism, see: Schuller 2021; Newman 1999; Nadkarni 2014.

“That there is even a relationship between material well-being and child-bearing is a twentieth-century, middle-class, and to some extent white belief,” historian Laura Briggs insists (2017: 127). Nevertheless, it’s been but a series of logical steps from that hegemonic notion of reproductive meritocracy to the beginnings of the pregnancy “gig” economy we can glimpse today. In unprecedentedly literal ways, people make babies for others in exchange for the money required to underwrite morally, as well as materially, their own otherwise barely justifiable baby-having. It’s not quite accurate, though, to say that the basic ideas of early eugenicist reproductive policy have *resurfaced* in late capitalism – or even to say that they’ve survived. Rather, as W. E. B. Du Bois lays out in *Black Reconstruction in America*, these interlocking logics of property and sub-humanity, privatization, and punishment, form the template that organized capitalism in the first place and sustains it as a system (Du Bois 1999). Dominant liberal-democratic discourses that hype a world of post-racial values and bootstrap universality only serve to render dispossessed populations the more responsible for their trespass of being alive and having kids while black. Stratification is self-reproducing and not designed to be resolved.

It is still educational to call out contemporary iterations of eugenic common sense for their face-value incoherence; still legitimate to point out (the hypocrisy!) that even as urban working-class and black motherhood continues to come under attack, the barriers to Black and working-class women's access to contraception and abortion grow steadily more formidable. The positive "choice" to "freely invest" in having a baby is one that numerous laws are literally forcing many people to make, with dire and frequently fatal results. Obstetric care in India remains to this day among the scantest in the whole world – even though India exports and offers obstetric medical care to customers around the world. Such contradictions, as Melinda Cooper details in her account of the speculative logics of the "biotech" economy, *Life As Surplus*, are part and parcel of capitalist geopolitical economy – which needs populations to extinguish in the process of making others thrive (Cooper 2008). The account of the booming bioeconomy of "living material" detailed by Cooper offers a prism that enables us to see the predatory logic of financialized capitalism as a question, not only of uneven value driving the global division of racialized living labour, nor simply "human capital" in neoliberal terms, but of access to *life* as a side-effect of

accumulation. It's not just life that is a sexually transmitted disease, as the old joke has it. Birth justice campaigners know, as indeed AIDS activists knew in the 1980s and 1990s, that it is death that sex spreads, simultaneously, in the context of for-profit health care.

However, this depressing state of affairs hasn't ever been the whole story. The "speculation" of which gestational labor is capable has multiple, perhaps even communizing, valences. From Soviet mass holiday camps for pregnant comrades, to Germany's inventive (albeit doomed) "twilight sleep" methods – designed to completely erase the memory of labour pain – not to mention over a hundred years of scientific prediction and science-fiction about ectogenesis and its imminent revolutionary social consequences, human history contains a plethora of ambitious ideologies and technological experiments for liberating and collectivising childbirth. It's admittedly an ambivalent record. Irene Lusztig, director of a beautiful 2013 archival film on this subject, has understandably critical words for the various early-twentieth-century rest-camps and schools of childbirth she discusses (Lusztig 2013). But, she suggests, you have to hand it to them – even the most wrongheaded of textbooks written a century ago at least stated the problem to be solved in uncompromising terms: "Birth injuries are so common that Nature must intend for women to be used up in the process of reproduction, just as a salmon die after spawning." (ibid)

Well if that's what Nature intends, the early utopian midwives and medical reformers featured in *The Motherhood Archives* responded: then Nature is an ass. Why accept Nature as natural? If this is what childbirth is "naturally" like, they reasoned, looking about them in the maternity wards of Europe and America, then it quite obviously needs to be denatured, remade. Easier said than done. Pioneering norms of fertility care based on something like cyborg self-determination have turned out to be a moving target. The exceptionality and care-worthiness of gestation remains something that has to be forcibly naturalized, spliced in against the grain of a "Nature" whose fundamental indifference to death, injury, and suffering does not, paradoxically, come naturally to most of us.

Many of these efforts to emancipate humanity from gestational "Nature" claimed the name of "Nature" for their cause, too. For instance, the turn to so-called "natural childbirth" – which earned such fiery contempt from Firestone, the founder of New York Radical Women, for being bourgeois – more accurately stands for a regimen full of carefully stylized gestational labor hacks and artifices, a suite of mental and physical conditioning that may be billed as "intuitive" but which nevertheless take time and skill to master. "Natural

childbirth” has never gone entirely out of fashion and is still extremely popular among diverse social classes. Particular subdoctrines of natural childbirth continue to come under well-justified fire wherever they stray into mystification – some ecofeminists, for instance, are rightly criticized by xenofeminists for romanticizing loss of bodily autonomy (Hester 2019: 37–40)<sup>4</sup>. However, the broader free-birthing movement’s foundational critique of just-in-time capitalist obstetrics and its colonial-patriarchal history (whereby midwives, witches, and their indigenous knowledges were expelled from the gestational workplace) is hard to fault.<sup>5</sup>

I have no quarrel with the world’s trans-inclusive autonomist midwives and radical doulas, the ones lobbying for their work to become a guaranteed form of free health care rather than a profitable profession. I have no quarrel with “full-spectrum” birth-work that supports people of all genders through abortion, miscarriage, fertility treatments, labor, and postpartum, often operating outside of biomedical establishments, spreading bottom-up mutual aid, disseminating methods geared toward achieving minimally (that is, sufficiently) medicated, maximally pleasurable reproduction. Power to them. With their carefully refined systems of education, training, and traditional lay science, they are, in their own way, creating a nature worth fighting for. It can hardly be an accident that, as anyone who spends time in midwifery networks will realize, so many of them are anti-authoritarian communists.

But let’s not forget to demand the impossible with regard to birth. Critical utopianisms require us to struggle in, against, and beyond the present state of things. Where are we now? Few people consciously want babies to be commodities. Yet baby commodities are a definite part of what gestational labor produces today. Given the variety of organizing principles that can apply to the baby assembly line, it is ahistorical (at best) to claim that what we produce when we’re pregnant is simply “life,” love, or “synthetic value”: the value of human knitted-togetherness (O’Brien 1981). Such claims are unsatisfying, in the first instance, because they fail to account for gestators who do not bond with what’s inside them. And they can’t fully grasp altruistic surrogacy, where the goal is explicitly to not generate a bond between gestator and baby in the course of the labor (even if some surrogates do attach and sometimes propose a

4 Helen Hester critically unpacks Maria Mies’s view of pregnancy.

5 For examples of literature written from the “free-birthing” or “natural childbirth” wing of the reproductive justice movement, refer to: Mahoney, Mary/Mitchell, Lauren (2016).

less exclusive, open adoption-style parenting model after they've given birth). The related, philosophically widespread, claim that social bonds are grounded biologically in pregnancy – what some call the “nine-month head-start” to a relationship – is ultimately incomplete. The better question is surely: a head-start to what? What type of social bonds are grounded by which approach to pregnancy?

Clearly, if I am gestating a fetus, I may feel that I am in relationship with that (fetal) part of my body. That “relationship” may even ground the sociality that emerges around me and the infant if and when it is born, assuming that we continue to cohabit. But I may also conceptualize the work in a completely different way – grounding an alternate social world. I may never so much as see (or wish to see) my living product; am I not still grounding a bond with the world through that birth? For that matter, people around me may fantasize that they are in a relationship with the interior of my bump, and they will even be “right” insofar as the leaky contamination and synchronization of bodies, hormonally and epigenetically, takes place in many (as yet insufficiently understood) ways. We simply cannot generalize about “the social” without knowing the specifics of the labor itself. And, regardless of the “ground” the gestational relationship provides, the fabric of the social is something we ultimately weave by taking up where gestation left off, encountering one another as the strangers we always are, adopting one another skin-to-skin, forming loving and abusive attachments, and striving at comradeship. To say otherwise is to naturalize and thus, ironically, to devalue that ideological shibboleth “the mother-fetus bond.” What if we reimagined pregnancy, and not just its prescribed aftermath, as work under capitalism – that is, as something to be struggled in, against, and beyond, toward a utopian horizon free of work and free of value?

Crucial to any antiwork “Aufhebung” of pregnancy will be our collective abolition of private property as it exists within kinship. That human beings are the products of gestational labour does not mean that a “nonalienated” relation between the labourer and her “fruits” is a property relation: *you are my child*. (The promissory reward of capitalist pregnancy is, in Firestone's terms, a “baby all your own to fuck up as you please.”) Let us remember, instead, the insights of the Third World Lesbian and Gay caucuses, the interracial Black lesbian mothers writing in *Off Our Backs!* in the Seventies, Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers, and the family-abolitionist wings of gay and women's liberation: that children *do not belong to anyone* except insofar as they belong to everyone, which is to say, they “belong only to themselves” (Peña/Carey 1979:

9). Let us assume that is possible for any of us to learn that it is the holders – not the delusional “authors,” self-replicators, and “patenters” – who truly people the world.

Holding bodies as fluid as human beings’ bodies is difficult, slippery labour. I have offered “amniotechnics” as a term for the watery art of holding and caring even while being ripped into, at the same time as being held (Lewis 2017)<sup>6</sup>. Amniotechnics is protecting water and protecting people from water, protecting the water that *is* people, as well as the water that is not (currently) people, *from* people. Our wateriness, I suggest in my first family-abolition manifesto, is our “surrogacy.”<sup>7</sup> It is the bed of our bodies’ overlap and it is, not necessarily – but possibly – a source of comradeship. To an extent, bodies are always leaky, parasited, and nonunitary, as the vital and varied flora of bacteria in every body, not just gestating ones, demonstrates. In the accounts of earthly life given by biologists such as Lynn Margulis, we are all revealed to be disconcertingly pregnant with myriad entities, bacteria, viruses, and more, some of whom are even simultaneously gestating us. It’s not safe nor is it pretty: to accept the world as fluid is also to accept fluidity’s price.

“Water management” may sound unexciting, but I suspect it contains key secrets to the kinmaking practices of the future. Just as with water, we’ve consented too much to the privatization of procreancy. Just as with water, we’ve taken kinship for granted, imagining it as something that is given, not made. Reproductive justice and water justice are inseparable. The substance of this connection, however, is often wrongly ascribed to the type of primitivism-tinged ecofeminism that too often roots its claims in tacitly colonial and sex-essentialist imaginaries of nature so as to be non-challenging to settler environmentalists and white allies. By way of antidote, we might consider the framing of water offered by the radical midwife Wicanhpi Iyotan Win Autumn

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6 Adapted as Chapter 7 of *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (Lewis 2019). The essay “Amniotechnics” has also been re-printed in a volume of essays and poetry, put together via the study group Matter in Flux and the research collective The World In Which We Occur. See: Teets, Jennifer (ed.) (2021). “Amniotechnics” also constitutes the basis of an iris-printed broadsheet by Johanna Ehde and Elisabeth Rafstedt, who spliced the text together with “Triple Jeopardy,” an early 1970s newspaper by Frances Beal and others in the Third World Women’s Alliance. See: Rietlanden Women’s Office (2020) *MsHeresies* #3. “Amniotechnics” appears, finally, in Denisa Tomková (ed.) (2022) *Kunsthalle Bratislava Online Publication*.

7 A second, shorter, manifesto, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*, was published by Verso Books in 2022.

Lavender-Wilson, who theorizes “amniotechnics” with the help of a long line of decolonial science and materialism:

It was through the work of Fanon and Memmi, LaDuke and Deloria, that I came to midwifery. As Dakota people, we understand that *mni wiconi* is not some fluffy abstract concept designed to fuel some hokey pseudo-spiritual practice. [C]lean water has the power to heal, contaminated water has the power to kill.<sup>8</sup>

For me, these words illuminate amniotic water as something that “complexity” theorist John Urry might call a “global fluid” (Urry 2002). Rather than equate water with a universal concept of ‘life,’ Wicanhpi approaches liquid as the historical ground of life in particular. Techniques for curating amniotic water, as she suggests, must integrate the dual meaning of ‘care’ (pain and relief) and the double power of medicine (poison and cure).

We have to make sure there isn't too much, or too little [amniotic water]. From the lead-contaminated water poisoning the children of Flint, Michigan, to cancer caused by [perfluorooctanoic acid] contamination in the water of Hoosick Falls, New York, to Newark public schools giving lead-contaminated water to their entire student and staff population ... to the consequences of uranium mining, nuclear waste facilities, fracking, oil spills and outdated public works systems ... [water politics] is and has been a lived reality for many Indigenous nations for the past several decades.<sup>9</sup>

Crucial to the practical awareness of pregnancy's liquid molecular joy and violence is, as Dakota midwives like Wicanhpi suggest, a consciousness of its embeddedness in global structures of social reproduction. Pregnancy is bound up with colonialism, white supremacy, capital, and gender – but also resistance.

A communist amniotechnics would unbuild the fantasy of an aseptic separation between all these spaces and entities. It would be the art of timing desired or needful openings between them that are savvy, safer, and conducive

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8 Changing Woman Initiative Blog (2016) “Mni Wiconi Yaktan k'a Ni Drink the Water of Life, and Live,” by Wicanhpi Iyotan Win Autumn Lavender-Wilson, 6 August (<https://web.archive.org/web/20170604072700/http://www.changingwomaninitiative.com/blog/mni-wiconi-yaktan-ka-ni-drink-the-water-of-life-and-live>).

9 Ibid.



to flourishing. Surrogates to the front! By surrogates, I mean all those comradely gestators, midwives, and other sundry interveners in the more slippery moments of social reproduction: repairing boats; swimming across borders; blockading lake-threatening pipelines; carrying; miscarrying. Let's all learn right now how comradely beings can help plan, mitigate, interrupt, suffer, and reorganize this amniotic violence. Let's think how we can assist in this regenerative wet-wrestling, sharing out its burden.

Recognizing our inextricably surrogated contamination with and by everybody else (and everybody else's babies) will not so much "smash" the nuclear family as make it unthinkable. And that's what needs to happen if we are serious about reproductive justice, which is to say, serious about revolution. There's a world worth living in, unfurling liquidly through the love and rage of – among other things – contract gestators' refusal to be temporary. For surrogates to enter the realm of the political is necessarily to abolish the concept of surrogation (*standing in, in place of the proper body*). For surrogates to struggle is to begin to render the concept of "surrogacy" unthinkable (as it should be) and the property relation untenable. It is to challenge to the logic of hierarchical "assistance," and a premonition of genuine mutuality. Speculatively, hopefully, we might call it an invading mode of life based on mutual aid.

For if babies were universally thought of as anybody and everybody's responsibility, "belonging" to nobody, surrogacy would not only generate no profits – it would cease to make sense at the most basic level. Wouldn't the question then simply be: how can baby making best be distributed and made to realize collective needs and desires?

Formal gestational workers' self-interest, like that of their unpaid counterparts, is an anti-work matter, and anti-work in the domain of care production is admittedly sometimes bloody. Their tacit threat to reproductive capitalism, whose knowledges and machinery they embody, takes the world a few steps toward anti-propertyarian polymaternalism. Terrifyingly and thrillingly, it whispers the promise of the reproductive commune. Two decades ago, more or less, my father told my brother and me that, no, actually, he would not love us if we were revealed to be, genetically speaking, "the children of the milkman" rather than "his kids." I can still feel the abyssal alienation of that moment. Yet, equally, in the aspirationally universal queer love of my friendship networks, in my queerly held and polymaternally tended flesh, I can sense the mutations of an incipient communization. Everywhere about me, I can see beautiful militants hell-bent on regeneration, not self-replication.

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