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Low-Tech Grassroots Ectogenesis

«I Think That Will Not Be A Problem»

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Drawing on her book *Full Surrogacy Now*, Sophie Lewis revisits the figure of Shulamith Firestone from a critical transfeminist perspective to pursue the idea that paid and unpaid human gestational labor alike constitute forms of work under capitalism that gestators themselves can seek to abolish. This essay originated as a lecture and discussion organized by Rose-Anne Gush and Barbara Kapusta in November 2020 as part of their «Feminism against Family [https://www.mumok.at/en/cinema/feminism-against-family]» program at mumok Vienna.





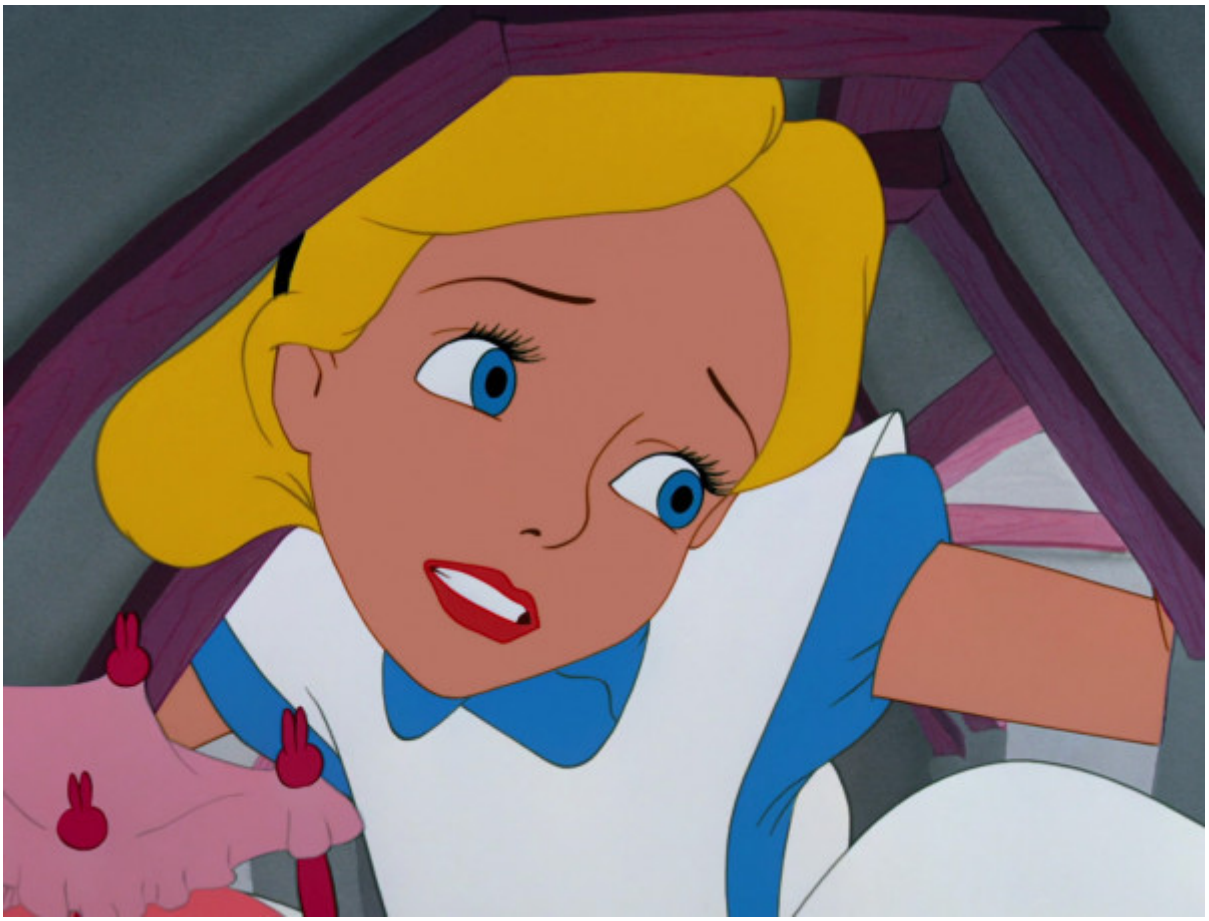
Sophie Lewis, image by Gracelynn Wan

«I THINK THAT WILL NOT BE A PROBLEM»: ON SHULAMITH FIRESTONE

When I published my anti-work book on gestational labor in 2019, I chose a subtitle more or less identical to the title of perhaps the harshest repudiation of Firestonism on record, namely, Jean Elshtain's 1989 article «Feminists Against the Family.» Indeed, in retrospect, there is no disputing that *Full Surrogacy Now* was an attempt to revive and reclaim Firestone's anti-family feminism and to reanimate, with pride, her revolutionary horizon of family abolition—even if there were equally-if-not-more-important trans and gay liberationist, queer-decolonial and Black feminist sources for my (reworked) «family abolitionism.»[1] Even after my book, which is so critical of Firestone, was published, I struggled to let go of my preoccupation with Firestone's vision—that vision famously brought to life in Marge Piercy's fictional city Mattapoisett[2]—of a way of manufacturing fetuses external to the human body; a post-gender mode of reproduction, facilitated by a central liquid ectogenic tank or «Brooder,» with all subsequent babymaking and parenting labor diffused across all of society. I even (unsuccessfully) poked my head around the entryway of a hospital near where I live, seeking to catch a glimpse of unborn lambs kicking their legs underwater through the polyethylene.[3]

All the same—as my sideways tone and disavowals in the above paragraph attest—I have hitherto always felt somewhat hesitant to declare myself unequivocally a queer Firestone fan-girl and advocate for (critical) Firestonism.[4] Her infamous book is, after all, studded with racist bloopers, reverence towards nineteenth-century lady suffragists I dislike, and «ambivalence toward female bodies»[5] as well as disgust—an always fascoid affect, if you ask me—at the xenohospitable embodiment of human gestating. Remarkably, it has no lesbians, no sex workers, no queer subjects in it at all.

So I have always been a little bemused by the fact that I (an anti-racist white bi dyke) am so easily moved to tears by newsreel documentary footage of her, or even simulations of it like *Shulie* (1997).[6] Why is it that I weep over tender writings such as those collected in *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex*[7] or *n+1*'s special 2013 «in memoriam» issue?[8] Or, I might find myself laughing, with peculiar intensity, over the anecdotes collected from Shulie's (ex-) friends and comrades in the latter, many of which make clear that she was routinely an arrogant jerk. The tributes recount Thanksgiving dinners featuring raw turkey,[9] haughty refusals to contribute to the labor of stapling or typing meeting minutes, and books borrowed but never returned on the basis that «she had better use»[10] for them. I strongly suspect I would have found her infuriating; that I would have fought with her over whiteness, femmeness, queerness, bodies. Yet I am smitten.



Alice in Wonderland bursting out of the seams of the white-picket fence nuclear household. https://idronline.org/user-content/uploads/2017/04/Alice-in-Wonderland_BCG-article.jpg

The Dialectic of Sex is a rare exemplar of utopianism-as-method. It was composed rapidly, oratorically, and with marvelous theatricality, this being a function of its genre, namely, the utopian manifesto: a genre whose pleasures have unfortunately been lost, as Kathi Weeks points out, on the more humorless and overly literal-minded among Firestone's readers.[11] Each page is peppered with raps, «bits,» asides, and vivid colloquial paraphrases of everyday common sense. The whole thing is a highly skillful charm offensive. She is making love to us, against Love™. Why is it not more often stated how winningly *funny* the author of *The Dialectic* is? Her «affective voice,» notes Susanna Paasonen, is intensely seductive: the reader experiences «a particular contagious affect in the forms of address.»[12] Contagious is right. Most uncharacteristically for me, I find myself wishing to overlook her egregious political errors.[13]

Full disclosure: I might also be infected with a case of grief displacement. I have now long been haunted by a sense of the similarities between my (erstwhile Maoist) mother and Shulamith Firestone. Like my mother, who died in November 2019, Firestone declined in later life to talk about her earlier life's work and lived out her last days willfully striving towards loneliness. The resonances are painful. In the late eighties, in New York, the solidarity efforts of the Friends of Shulamith Firestone collective were ultimately unsuccessful at preventing her from being evicted from her apartment.[14]Subsequently, as Susan Faludi recounts, «in the early nineties … a group of women met weekly with Firestone to help her with practical needs, from taking her anti-psychotic medications to buying groceries.»[15] Luckily, like my mother, Firestone was never quite made homeless. Like my mother, it seems, she styled herself as dominant, bordering on tyrannical, eccentrically cute, and a wit. She evidently took pleasure in men as sexual partners, not to mention intellectual sparring partners. But—again like my mother—she sadly ceased, early on, to be able to enjoy men in bed, because mental illness set in (schizophrenia: that feminized «airlessness»[16]

borne of life under white capitalist patriarchy).

Yet the hot, difficult personality of 1970-era Shulamith Firestone asserts itself, to this day, like a wildfire, a virus; we seldom seem to state this explicitly. Her memory elicits a fierce, special strain of loyalism—love, even—among many of us who are still living (young and old), whether or not we knew her personally, whether or not we feel she was a good person.

But I also think there is an unspoken additional element that has to do with, how can I put this, her horniness. I am thinking, in particular, of my very favorite, characteristically ultra-earnest-yet-consciously-funny lines from *The Dialectic*; a line from the final chapter that one can read, if one chooses, as laden with innuendo: «What would people do in this utopia? I think that will not be a problem.»[17] The fact that Firestone's thought contains both somatophobia—a horror at the «distended» gestating body—and a libidinous appetite for human bodies is just one among her numerous vivid contradictions.



Shulamith Firestone https://ethics.org.au/big-thinker-shulamith-firestone/

The contradictions go on—they seem to mushroom the more one thinks about them. For instance, in her famous *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (1991), Donna Haraway noted that, for Firestone, the body is aligned with the enemy, i.e., the sphere of nature: she repeatedly falls into the mistaken assumption that there are «natural objects (bodies) separate from social relations.»[18] Yet, alongside this frustrated antipathy toward the corporeal—insofar as it appears given, unpliable—it is also precisely the technological fleshiness and animality of the cyborg that has been perceived in *The Dialectic*: «a form of embodied utopia.»[19] It has even been suggested that «The true heir to Firestone is Donna Haraway.»[20]

In 2015, the Laboria Cuboniks collective first launched «Xenofeminism» with its famous XF slogan «If nature is unjust, change nature!»[21]—prompting more than one Firestone scholar to write that Firestone was a «xenofeminist before her time.»[22] One must specify here, though, that Firestone is «not seduced by the prospect of that technologically achieved divorce from the body that so engaged later cyberfeminism.»[23] The problem of pregnancy shall never for her, as Bassett notes, be solved via boundary dissolution or posthuman border confusion. Rather, the solution is the provision to gestators of the means for complete bodily integrity (ectogenesis), the better to support human bodily autonomy.

This is the same dialectic that Emma Heaney proposes in her reading of trans women in 70s feminist organizing. «The two strains of trans feminism [we find in the radical archive of the 70s] advocate, in turn, for the transcendence of gender and women's autonomy. [They] are mutually enabling political practices that confront both enforcement of gender norms and

misogyny. Trans women's autonomy in all its forms is the necessary pretext for a conversation to unfold [I would insert here: a conversation about liberation from gestational oppression to unfold], not between trans feminists and trans misogynists, but among feminists of trans experience and their sisters and siblings who have received the gift of trans-feminist autonomist legacies.»

Finally….. Readers familiar with the opening pages of *Full Surrogacy Now* will already have spotted that this Firestonist sensibility of imaginative refusal has been at the front and center of my own theoretic endeavors around gestational work.[24] «No to pregnancy» is, in truth, a remarkably simple demand that can, at times, seem inarguable, albeit it strikes readers as unthinkably radical. Personally (contra Firestone), I take a utopian, critically pro-pregnancy line: I vindicate the workers in the workplaces of contemporary commercial gestation, on the one hand, but also, on the other, the chimerical, intimate, bloody brutality of placental co-production itself (*xenohospitality*).[25] While I have sometimes, to my chagrin, been understood as a matrophobe, I have consistently been at pains to affirm, not just the *creative* power of gestators, but the freedom of anyone to engage in extreme sports, including those involving alien colonization-from-within. Everybody should be supported, in my view, to engage in kinky pursuits (like pregnancy) that involve a degree of danger, and there should be maximal infrastructural safeties in place to this end, to broaden access, and to prevent undesired injury.

Surely, however, there is an ethical imperative to create conditions in which humans are empowered to say «no» to gestating if they want to, given that the current labor conditions faced by gestational laborers are nothing less than lethal. As of 2017, no fewer than 300,000 people were still dying because of their pregnancy, every year.[26] It is absurd, frankly, to *expect* a person to do pregnancy. Her reasoning on this is unimpeachably sound. The putative duty for human beings to replenish the human population and ensure posterity is not her problem. People endowed with viable uteruses, she reminds us,

> have no special reproductive obligation to the species. If they are no longer willing, then artificial methods will have to be developed hurriedly, or, at the very least, satisfactory compensations—other than destructive ego investments—would have to be supplied to make it worth their while.[27]

It is hard to imagine a more vivid demonstration of the utopian power of simple negation.

Post-gender, there will be pleasure: *I think that will not be a problem*. As Alice Echols has explained, for Firestone, «feminism's goal wasn't the ‹elimination of sexual joy and excitement,› but rather its ‹rediffusion› over ‹the spectrum of our lives.›»[28]

It is true and unfortunate that there is something structurally queerphobic in Firestone (queerphobic because somatophobic, i.e., phobic of carnal wildness, alienness, and excess). Firestone, tragically, fails to find room in her imagination for an erotics of gestationality. Nevertheless—as Lane-McKinley might say—the structurally queer elan that is the motor of *The Dialectic*'s gallop towards the omni-erotic post-familial world to come, in turn, disrupts this failing in the text.

The Dialectic of Sex is not so much a sexy manifesto as one that wants to be able to have hitherto undreamt-of forms of sex. We don't like to talk about this, because of her prediction that children would include themselves in the polymorphous orgies of the future (albeit they would no longer be «children» in the current sense). And it is surely for this reason that, as Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford note on page 1 of their anthology, *The Dialectic* is nowhere to be found in «the bibliographies of Queer Theory,» despite being an unmistakably

anti-heteropatriarchal project, dedicated to dismantling not just «romanticism» (as she calls heterosexual culture) but the very sex distinction itself. I do not dispute the queasiness that the topic of «children's liberation»—at least, the erotic components of that dream of '68—induces in our contemporary sensibilities. I only posit that, if Millennial queers like me still feel an electrified affinity with Firestone's fifty-year-old bombshell Case For Feminist Revolution («Chapter 6 Might Change Your Life!»), it is likely by virtue of its central demand for orgiastic fucking.

The Dialectic, I submit, is a structurally queer text, its queerphobic aspects notwithstanding.

I want to repeat this plainly: *The Dialectic of Sex* is a book that rips and re-burns (in Caroline Bassett's phrase) both Marx and Freud, and theorizes thoroughgoing revolution, in order to look forward, in its very final pages, to a post-work society characterized by lots and lots of free-flowing fucking:

> With full liberty human relationships eventually would be redefined for the better. … the concentration on genital sex and orgasmic pleasure giving way to total physical/emotional relationships that included that. … [G]enital sex would no longer be the central focus of the relationship … All close relationships would include the physical, our concept of exclusive physical partnerships (monogamy) disappearing from our psychic structure, as well as the construct of a Partner Ideal. … Love and sexuality would be reintegrated, flowing unimpeded.[29]

This is precisely the kind of «transsexual» erotic optimism that is commonly associated with Gay Liberationists like Mario Mieli, whose utopian treatise *Towards a Gay Communism*[30] was first published in Italian in 1977. Here is an ostensibly heterosexual woman theorizing much the same transcendence of Oedipal taboos, much the same dissolution of the homosexual/heterosexual distinctions in a welter of collective eros, fully seven years prior. To be sure, there is simultaneously much in *The Dialectic* that is «haplessly heterosexist,» as Merck aptly puts it: «the assumed anatomical complementarity of straight sex,» for example, «radically undermines her prophesies of a future ‹transexuality.›»[31]

I remain persuaded, even so, by Madeline Lane-McKinley's argument: that Firestone can be understood not as part of the so-called Second Wave but, rather, as the author of a proto-transfeminist utopia belonging to the «queer-feminist interventions in science fiction writing that began in the late 1960s.»

> Alongside works by Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Marge Piercy, Samuel Delany, Joanna Russ, and others, The Dialectic of Sex exhibits some of the key problems examined by the critical utopia, a subgenre committed to interrogating the colonial and patriarchal history of Western utopian literature. … Whereas Western literature has predominantly imagined the utopian as an enclave of perfection and stasis—most notably through the figure of the colonized island—the critical utopian interventions of this period, including Firestone, dismantle the tropology of world building to recover utopia as a mode of negation. In such a manner, Firestone's utopianism unfolds as a process of «[letting] the unthinkable arise through the struggle,» as Caroline Bassett suggests…[32]



Rose Annes background images during Sophies lecture «I love the way you look Rose Anne! Like being actively gestated by Tala Madanis art»

I want to end with a note, not of attenuation, but of clarification. In this last passage, we have apprehended the liberation struggle as a trajectory into the unthinkable, the unknowable; the liberation struggle as a matter of—as Alice Echols described Firestone in the title of one article—being «totally ready to go»[33] despite not knowing *where*. Now, this all may sound like something I am idealizing simply because it arouses my desire. Not so. Granted, I will no longer dispute that critical Firestonism is subtended, in my case at least, by a certain queer, turned-on Firestone fangirlism. But the wreckage of the women's movement, the wreckage of my mother's life post-'68, the anhedonic wreckage of Shulamith Firestone's body and mind we find in *Airless Spaces*—these are just as much a part of the «unthinkable» into which we are throwing ourselves when we step into that struggle. These desolate, anti-erotic vistas represent possible outcomes—*likely* ones, even.

Given the near-total implosion of Firestone's social and political life, the collapse of her spiritual well-being, and her withdrawal from the movement mere months after the publication of *The Dialectic of Sex*, it is tempting to review the defiantly diffident phrase from her final chapter, regarding post-Oedipal sexual libertinism—«I think that will not be a problem»—as grotesquely delusional. For god's sake, Shulamith! *Of course* it will be a problem (it, and a million other things we have not foreseen, too)!

My crush, however, and my sheer amusement at the deadpan campiness of that phrase, impel me to adopt a different stance. For, as Firestone reminds us:

> The classic trap for any revolutionary is always, «What's your alternative?» … even if you could provide the interrogator with a blueprint, this does not mean he would use it: in most cases he is not sincere in wanting to know.

Today, these self-same anti-utopians still swarm feminists like me—feminist like us—in their hundred-and-one flavors, with their concern-trolling and their bad-faith questions. Won't

abolishing capitalism, the sex distinction, work, the family, be horribly *problematic*? Won't it generate *problems*?

Yes, is the only conceivable answer, as Shulie knew. *But I think that will not be a problem.*





Stiil from Tala Madani, The Womb, 2019, 3 min

Barbara

Thank you so much, Sophie! It was a pleasure to listen to you. We want to express our gratitude to you for sharing your thoughts with us.

Rose-Anne Gush

Thank you so much, Sophie. I have enjoyed your talk so much, especially the tone of it. The idea that communism can be imagined through this idea of surrogacy. This is such a very beautiful idea. Caring for one another as ourselves and creating this world by care.

Could you talk about the dialectic between on the one hand the phobic relation that Firestone has to any kind of dissolution or dissolving of borders, and then the idea of providing to gestators bodily integrity and therefore bodily autonomy. Can you just expand on this?

Sophie Lewis

I love the way you look, Rose Anne! Like being actively gestated by Tala Madani's art.

Though the conceptual content is slightly different, I am taking the *shape* of this dialectic –between abolition and autonomy – from Emma Heaney, whose work I have been using in my online course «Trans/Queer/Women [https://thebrooklyninstitute.com/items/courses/new-york/trans-queer-woman-theory-and-politics-2/]» (which is attempting in a mere four weeks to teach and explore the lines of tension between Trans Studies and Queer Theory… as well as this category Woman). Emma Heaney, who is a proponent of «Materialist Transfeminism against Queer Theory,» has an incredible book out called *The New Woman*. In the last chapters she makes a case, in a situated grounded historically rooted way, for the necessity of the category Woman politically—divested of the colonial, racist cis-sexist baggage that led us to turn away from it in the first place.

It was so pleasurable to understand, over time, that my political commitments in *Full Surrogacy Now* were the same as Emma's, because this hadn't been quite visible to me or not quite spelled out. That was partly because, of course, while Emma is looking at the allegorization of the transfeminine in literary history, I am looking at something else: motherhood, gestation and pregnancy, which are typically shackled to the category Woman in ways that I found productive to disrupt. I think what has now happened is that I have understood that the question of autonomy has asserted itself as coming first. You can only abolish the *boundaries* (as Emma shows in her historic study of trans women in the 70s as feminists, side by side with their non-trans sisters) … once you have established that *autonomy*.

This dialectic is beautifully articulated in her revision of the received cultural-feminist narratives: these are narratives we have of pure factionalism, fantasizing a cis status quo that predated transfeminism, narratives which Heaney and others have really productively turned on their head. Heaney's book is also partly about how sexology and modernism *made sex cis* , and by the same token it allows us to see how feminism itself was retroactively narrated as cis, when in reality it was not.

So, while I have not fully worked this out, in terms of how it applies to Firestone's aversion to boundary dissolution, and her consequent understanding of real bodily autonomy purely in terms of grassroots-led ectogenesis… I think what I am trying to say is that we can generatively help complete, correct, and supplement Firestone by, in the place of her somatophobia, ensuring that we have, in the first place, the conditions for gestators to get away from the deadening oppositions of feminism versus femininity.

Emma Heaney

Hi! My question is about the characterization of Firestone as not knowing where she is marching. And this is a standard element of Marxist political imagining: that you don´t have to know where you are marching, because where you are marching is a world that will be *inventing itself*, absent the structural conditions that produce the immiseration of the present. So I am wondering if you could talk for a little bit about the Bio-bag and the relational structures that you talked about at the end. Feminism needs to be able to envision the new conditions of life that will come. Or is it the same as Marxism, in this regard—there is no obligation to try and imagine a world outside the class contraction? Is it productive to think about how those questions are the same or different in the two practices? Is there something about the fact that feminism has a different relation to our interpersonal lives and our domestic spaces and our collective practices than does Marxism, in regard to labor and the workplace?

Sophie

Thank you! I think there is a difference. I agree with you. For that reason, I have been rightly asked a lot about whether I have sufficiently inflected a platform around abolishing the family with attention to the specificity of Black families against the state, colonized families and so on. I hoped that I had done some, to center Black Feminism for example, in my family abolitionism. The specificity of Feminism relative to Marxism, bearing in mind both as a kind of utopian method, is that there is nothing closer to us than our loves, our beloveds, our babies, our bodies, our food… and so, feminism perhaps suggests itself as the more immediate and present technique and strategy, the practice perfected by «those of us who were never meant to survive»—as Audre Lorde puts it—and have therefore had to become vernacular experts at survival. Experts at social reproduction, if that is the phrase we want to use.

Perhaps it feels as though *feminists* is the better word for those of us who have managed in and against and beyond the infrastructures of necropolitics or reproductive *desistance* (which is a term that Sharmila Rudrappa uses, meaning the obverse of reproduction assistance) to weave kinships and livelihoods. So off the top of my head, in reply to your question, it seems I am suggesting that feminism is here, immanently, already, in a way that perhaps communism is less so. I think we can glimpse it in our intimate relations—the gestational commune—in the fact of queer people looking after one another other. Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson’s STAR house is one example that you and I, Emma, both talk about in our books as examples of revolutionary care. But this is what I should be stressing more, and learning more about from Black feminists (not all of whom are inspired by the terminology of «family abolition»).

In moments in my book, but mostly in clarificatory conversations and subsequent articles, I’ve tried to express that the horizon is kind of one of «real families against ‹the› family.» There is a dialectic like that in play: universalizing the kernel of tenderness and actualized love that we *do* manage to coproduce together in this hell-world in a comradely manner. Generalizing relations of kith as well as kin; relations that are xenohospitable, that don’t try and naturalize away the contingency of all loves and bonds. We have a movement of utopian feminism in our intimate lives. Perhaps it is difficult to say the same about communism. Although I would not separate the two.

Rose-Anne

Thank you so much! I also found it so generative to hear more about the relation of communism or Marxism and feminism. And the question of whether there is a problem with a blanket claim for abolition. Is there also an uneven development of the family?

Sophie

I think the phrase «uneven development of the family» is extremely apt. And, just to say, before I move on: Michelle O`Brien is particularly good at doing this archival and historical Marxist heavy lifting on this question, which I have myself not undertaken. I deeply recommend on that subject Michelle O`Brien's article «To Abolish the Family» in *Endnotes Vol 5*. I am honored to say that she and I have been for several years now part of a small cluster of scholars, para-academics, and militants trying to revive this problematic of transcending the nuclear private household. But she really does the granular historic work in a very long chronological investigation of how the private nuclear household—as a fiction, as a legal entity and an aspiration and ordering ideology—was *won* by working-class populations in Europe, and gained access to … whereas for other traditions, it was different. In certain strains of Black radicalism, for example, the affordance of that property of formal familiality is not something to struggle towards and inhabit but, rather, something to remain outside of and to transcend via actually liberatory kinmaking that far exceeds that which is possible within the «biofam.»



Still from Martha Rosler, Born to Be Sold: The Strange Case of Baby M/S, 1988, 28 min

Lizzy

I just wonder if you could say something more about this idea of uneven development. I find myself thinking about the uneven development of different feminisms in your book, and the meaning of surrogacy in relation to questions of transness, and in particular, the current

transphobia in the UK that is just mind-blowingly disturbing and distressing.

Sophie

The UK is a trip when it comes to transphobia! And the question often comes up: how was it that British Feminism became so seemingly monolithically anti-trans? I try, whenever I can, to point the finger at colonialism (amongst other things). There are also contingent factors like the nepotism and cronyism of the British cultural and media establishment. But, paradoxically, self-styled TERF ideology—which is now so rampant in the UK and passing itself of as feminism writ large—originated in the weirder fringes of the «Deep Green» ecology movement in the US. It came over from there, via the movement to stop nuclear power, and via lesbian separatism of a certain 80s flavor. But it is «transgender ideology» and «genderism» in general that British TERFs like to cast as American, and as individualistic for that reason. The fantasy is that, in Britain, there are proper women (which seems to mean middle-class cis subjects of hygienic *real* gender): they are no-nonsense, they «call a spade a spade,» and so on. They would never do something so narcissistic as to have gender identity. And this all speaks so much to an all-round atmosphere of latter-day Empire grotesquery. I have been making jokes about it, but it is a fascism. It gains its power via its collaborations with forms of fascism. It needs to be treated, then, with all the seriousness with which we'd treat any other form of fascism.

I just remembered, actually, that there was a moment in late 2017 when some big advances in womb transplant technology were reported on, and there were a lot of British transphobic feminists who were publicly shuddering at the possibility that trans women might benefit from this. Some transphobes associated with the organization A Women's Place, in the UK, were actually linking to the evolutionary biologist Susan Sadedin's controversially grisly account of the biology of placentation, which I also use to open my book—and I hope it is clear in my book that doing so is not a phobic anti-pregnancy gesture. I start from there in order to understand how appealing, significant and full of un-actualized possibility gestation might be as a collective practice, as something we might be able to bio-hack to actualize its pleasure and minimize its dangers. But for TERFs, it is the opposite. The violence of pregnancy is something they would rather not change, if changing it meant including trans women in the category of «gestator.»

Helen

I have a question about the voice you used in this particular talk. I was really struck by the rhetorical strategy of weaving in your own experiences, and it seems like you were responding to Firestone's biography, as much as to her ideas, in a way we have not really discussed so much. Maybe you could link this to your own journey, in your research, as well. I am sure the question of «situated knowledge»—and Haraway—is there, as well, thinking about autofiction and auto-ethnography. Is this a direction you travel, that you are going in?

Sophie

Thank you, Helen! As I have now written about in three or four different forums, my mother (that is: my official mother, my in-this-world-only official mother…) died a year ago, and it changed something about my writing style. I also have, simultaneously, fallen more and more out of the narrative that I will be an academic. I think very highly of the Brooklyn Institute for

Social Research, but I sell my services to them as a teacher in exchange for a percentage of my students' enrolment fees. So I am a part of what will no doubt unfortunately become, in the years ahead, an increasingly large population of ad hoc jobless para-academics and freelance writers. That comes with constraints of its own, but it does mean a bit more freedom when it comes to «voice.»

So, the voice I use is because of Mum's death… because of this eruption of a more direct palpable relationship to think concepts like xenohospitality and comradeliness with (and in… and against). Inevitably, trying and (in some ways) failing at doula-ing my mother's dying process made me more likely to write unapologetically in this autofiction-inflected way. After all, there is no reason to write academically unless you try to get published in academic journals and have a career that involves «real» jobs within the university.

I wanted to try to write a piece that owns up— … So, I have a piece in e-flux [https://www.e-flux.com/journal/111/343916/with-women-grieving-in-capitalist-time/] about this notion of being a with-woman, a midwife, a many- or any-gendered motherer, including a *motherer of one's mother*. It's a piece that tries to ask how we might think about that: about supporting those who are doing difficult forms of with-woman-ing or doula-ing and attempting to do so in a collective or in some way liberatory manner. I also have a piece called «Momrades against Motherhood [https://salvage.zone/in-print/mothering-against-the-world-momrades-against-motherhood/].» And I think just owning up to … the emotion I felt about Firestone, who died in this miserable way, and who reminds me of my mother! My mother was a very bad motherer. She was very bad at caring for her children. This is something I have written about. And I love her very much, and I did make an effort to care for her at the end. But her death was not a good death. As you were saying, Helen, about Shulamith's biography: that fact that she was in some way cared for by the people whose lives she transformed utterly (by writing the book she did), and yet still died alone in her apartment, really speaks to the deadening forces, the difficulties of even daring to think in a utopian manner against the crush of the present. It is not a happy topic.

Helen

It is interesting, the way you engage with her on this ambivalent level. The forgivingness you have for her. You are willing to engage despite your misgivings. You devoted this time to really try to think with her, which is interesting, if only because it is so rare. Often when we engage intellectually with history we easily cast someone aside and say, «they are not for my politics,» instead of «okay, that is interesting: let's celebrate this and try to think with this idea or with this persona, and stay with the ambivalences.» I think you have done the same with Donna Haraway as well.

Sophie

Thank you! That is a very meaningful assessment for me. I am very wary of the norm—the encouraged tendency!—to commit a kind of matricide in the academy, on the left, among feminists. So if I am succeeding, as is my intention, at doing something more comradely than that, then that is everything I would hope for in that respect. Comradeliness is important to understand, I feel, as being loving but not romanticizing. It is also self-interested. If I am thinking with my mother or with Shulie, for instance, that includes directly engaging the ways in which they really sucked. It is hard because I am, if you like, one of the victims. We are

part of the collateral. I don´t want to continue the analogy too closely because they are two very different people, but in my mother's case the isolation of the nuclear household completely did her in. She preferred alcoholism and death to being in the nuclear household (I believe it is not an exaggeration to say). We need to have a world in which people are not consigned to lives like that. This includes children, who get stuck in that household too.

[1] Prime among these: Hortense Spillers, Kim TallBear, Alexis Pauline Gumbs.

[2] Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (London: Fawcett, 1976).

[3] Sophie Lewis, «Do Electric Sheep Dream of Water Babies?» *Logic magazine* 8 (2019) logicmag.io/bodies/do-electric-sheep-dream-of-water-babies.

[4] e-flux lectures: Sophie Lewis, «Wages for Womb-Work, Polymaternalism, Critical Firestonianism,» November 6, 2019. Video archived at: e-flux.com/program/297764/e-flux-lectures-sophie-lewis-wages-for-womb-work-polymaternalism-critical-firestonianism.

[5] Caroline Bassett, «Impossible, Admirable, Androgyne: Firestone, Technology, and Utopia,» in Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford (eds.), *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 88.

[6] Elisabeth Subrin, dir. *Shulie*, 1997. Super 8 / 16mm, United States, 37min. vdb.org/titles/shulie.

[7] Merck and Sandford 2010.

[8] «On Shulamith Firestone,» *n+1 magazine* 15 (Winter 2013). nplusonemag.com/issue-15/in-memoriam/on-shulamith-firestone. The memorial also comprised an «online only» collection, beginning with: Dayna Tortorici, «Preface: On Firestone,» *n+1* (September 26, 2012), http://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/on-shulamith-firestone-preface. See also Dayna Tortorici and Beth Stryker (eds.), *The Shulamith Firestone Memorial Pamphlet*, September 23, 2012.

[9] Beth Rasbaum, in «On Firestone, Part 2,» *n+1* (September 26, 2012), nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/on-firestone-part-2.

[10] Ros Baxandall, ibid.

[11] Kathi Weeks, «The Vanishing Dialectic: Shulamith Firestone and the Future of the Feminist 1970s,» *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114 (4) (2015), 735–754, here 738.

[12] Susanna Paasonen, «From Cybernation to Feminization: Firestone and Cyberfeminism,» in Merck and Sandford 2010, 75.

[13] Forgiveness, to be clear, is not finally for me to grant. The moments in her thought that resonate with anti-black, homophobic, femmephobic and transphobic movements in feminist history are moments I am personally positioned, in time and space, sufficiently comfortably to sigh and shrug off.

[14] Susan Faludi, «Death of a Revolutionary,» *The New Yorker*, April 15, 2013, newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/15/death-of-a-revolutionary. Faludi writes: «In 1989, a local newspaper ran a small gossipy item about how the author of *The Dialectic of Sex* was acting crazy and was about to be evicted from her Second Street studio. Kathie Sarachild, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Kate Millett, and a few others organized the Friends of Shulamith Firestone to fight the eviction in housing court. But Firestone, convinced that a member of her former cohort had placed the gossip item, wouldn't let them represent her.»

[15] Ibid.

[16] Shulamith Firestone, *Airless Spaces* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1998).

[17] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex. The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1970), 235.

[18] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 10.

[19] Bassett 2010, 103.

[20] Sarah Franklin, «Revisiting Reprotech: Firestone and the Question of Technology» in Merck and Sandford 2010, 50.

[21] Labora Cuboniks, «The Xenofeminist Manifesto,» 2015. laboriacuboniks.net.

[22] Victoria Margree, «Shulamith Firestone: Xenofeminist Before her Time?» *The Mantle*, undated: themantle.com/philosophy/shulamith-firestone-xenofeminist-her-time.

[23] Bassett 2010, 98.

[24] Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (London: Verso Books, 2019).

[25] Sophie Lewis, «Mothering Against the World: Momrades Against Motherhood,» *Salvage Quarterly* 8 (2020),193–213, salvage.zone/issue-8.

[26] The World Health Organization, Maternal Mortality—Key Facts, 19 September 2019. who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/maternal-mortality.

[27] Firestone 1970, p.233.

[28] Alice Echols, *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 108.

[29] Firestone 1970, 240–242.

[30] Mario Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism: Elements of a Homosexual Critique*, trans. David Fernbach and Evan Calder-Williams (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

[31] Mandy Merck, «Integration, Intersex, and Firestone's Dialectic,» in Merck and Sandford 2010, 168.

[32] Madeline Lane-McKinley, «The Dialectic of Sex, after the Post-1960s,» *Cultural Politics* 15 (3) (2019), 331–342, here 336.

[33] Alice Echols, «‹Totally Ready To Go›: Shulamith Firestone and The Dialectic of Sex,» reprinted in Echols 2002, 104.

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