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Reading together

An incomplete reading list on the topics of leakiness, care, communality, alternative ways of being with, and wet comradeliness

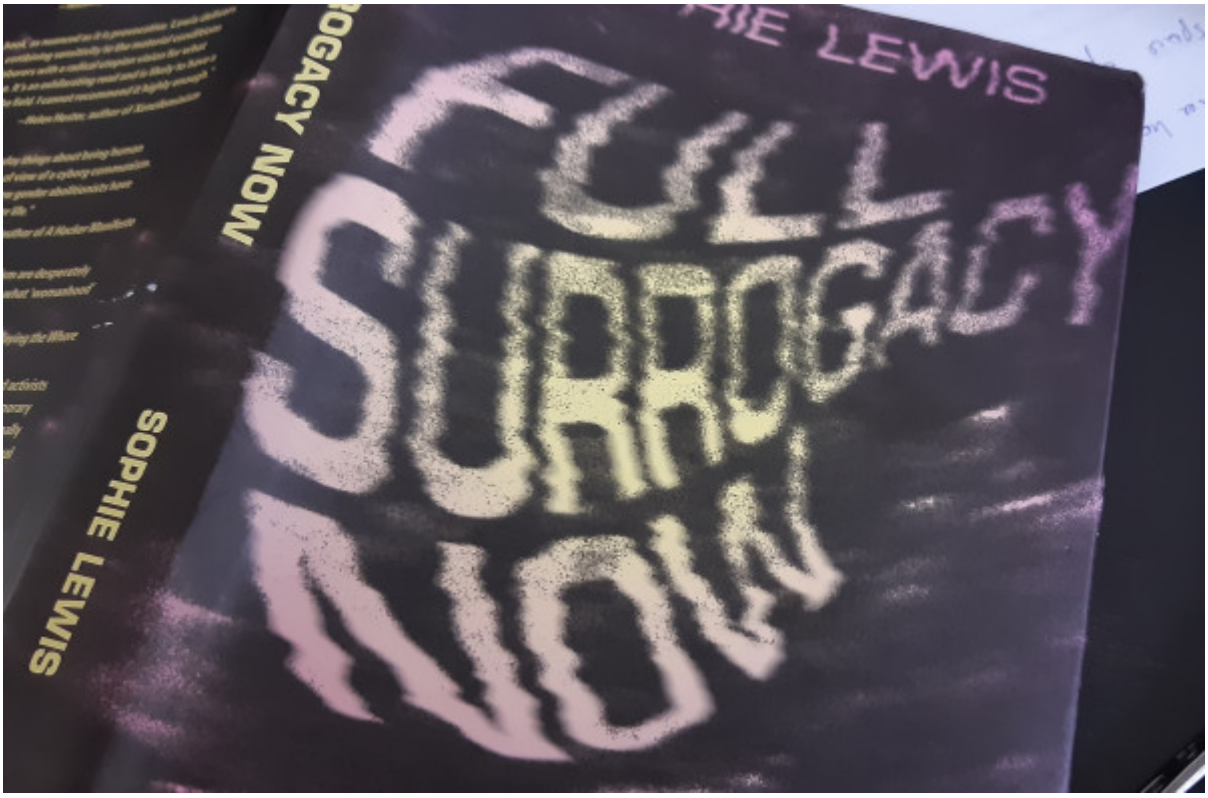
Barbara Kapusta, Olivia Aherne

We have compiled and annotated an incomplete reading list on and around the family, the body, and the technologies connected to it, care, labor and communality. Shared reading becomes common writing and creates leaks in our respective artistic and curatorial practices, asking how can we assist each other through the violence of a patriarchal and neoliberal capitalist understanding of the family, care, education, and health, as we have increasingly experienced it over the past year?



Reading list in order of appearance:

Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (Verso, 2019)
Paul B Preciado, *LEARNING FROM THE VIRUS*, Artforum 2020
[https://www.artforum.com/print/202005/paul-b-preciado-82823]
Paul B Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus* (MIT Press, 2019)
Maria Lassnig, *Bärbl* (1973)
The Newsreel Collective, *Janies Janie* (1972)
Julia Kristeva, *The Power of Horror*, (1980)
Tala Madani, *Grounded Mother* (2020)
Hannah Black, *GO OUTSIDE*. Hannah Black's Year in Review, Artforum (2020)
[https://www.artforum.com/print/202009/hannah-black-s-year-in-review-84376]
Johanna Hedva, *Sick Woman Theory*, Mask Magazine (2016
[http://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory_Hedva_2020.pdf])
Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (Verso, 2020)
Tavi Meraud, *Iridescence, Intimacies*, e-flux Journal #61 - January 2015
Sheila Heti, *Motherhood* (2018)
Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1979)
Sophie Lewis *«Mothering Against the World: Momrades Against Motherhood»*, Salvage, September 18, 2020 [https://salvage.zone/articles/mothering-against-the-world-momrades-against-motherhood/]



Reading Sophie Lewis *Full Surrogacy Now*, Vienna, February 2021

BK: Our process of shared reading and writing on and around the family, the body and the technologies connected to it, care, labor and communality started with Sophie Lewis' book *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family*. Lewis argues for a radical transformation of surrogacy, a breakdown of the assumption that children belong to those whose genetics they share – their «bio-fam» – and to radically transform notions of kinship. When referring to «full surrogacy,» «gestational communism» and «amniotechnics», she talks about the need to

take seriously the entanglement of bodies, technologies, and social worlds. In the final chapter of *Full Surrogacy Now* Lewis uses the term «amniotechnics» to link family abolitionist gestational utopianism and ecological practices, discussions on reproductive labor, anti-work, and water protection.

> 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. Reproductive justice and water justice are inseparable. (Lewis 2019, p. 164)

OA: In her text Lewis applies fluidity to notions of kinship and care and also moves away from a clear-cut categorical notion of «belonging.» Instead, these «amniotechnics» – which birth, spill and flood – are offered as a way to think through the social. In much of your work there are spills, there's a surplus of liquid or bodily fluid, which seems to leak out or pour over.

BK: *The Leaking Bodies Series* [ttps://vimeo.com/509739349] (2020) was really built around this idea of the leak, and the membrane. What I mean here, of course, is our skin, but also national borders, the soil, the transportation network of fluids like crude oil and portable water that crosses state lines, private land, continents and seas. They all leak. We all leak.



Dark liquid dripping from a pipe in *The Leaking Bodies* by Barbara Kapusta, 2020, 5:30, 3 channel video installation, video still

Our bodies leak not only our scents and our language but we also leak the leftovers of the whole pharmaceutical industry. We leak our hormones, and antidepressants; we even leak traces of COVID-19 mutations into our water. Life and beings are leaky and at the same time threatened by the leakiness of neoliberal financial capitalism and its infrastructure and machines. Still, I keep thinking and reminding myself of the possibilities that lie in the realm of the leaky. A leakiness, that also means communality, care and relationships. «What is being spread?» I ask in the voice-over to the video piece, referring not only to dangerous substances but also to something collective, something that can be shared and spread without

fear.

> ...we should cultivate thoughtfulness as to the technologies we use – borders, laws, doors, pipes, bowls, boats, baths, flood-barriers, and scalpels – in order to hold, release, and manage water. When is it time to release a boundary? When is it time to keep a point (cervixlike) firmly sealed? At what point (cervixlike) must the wall come down? When is a bandage ready to come off? How can a city be open to strangers and closed to tsunamis? (Lewis, p. 166)

OA: The open and close Lewis refers to, and the idea of knowing when to plug the hole, to «keep a point … firmly sealed» reminds me of Paul B. Preciado's text *LEARNING FROM THE VIRUS*, which was published last year in the midst of the first COVID-19 wave in France. He also uses terms like open/close and borders/barriers, specifically in relation to biopolitics, community and immunity. The point he makes about community is particularly interesting: «All protective acts include an immunitary definition of community in which the collective grants itself the power to decide to sacrifice a part of the population in order to maintain its own sovereignty.» And he goes on to argue that this immunitary ethos is what defines border politics – it's bound up in governance, exclusion and condemnation. What's interesting to me is that the pandemic – a kind of viral overspill or leak – has made hypervisible the fact that community is always (if inadvertently) established through processes of exclusion. With that in mind, then perhaps community as we know it today is both inclusive and exclusive at the same time? And if that's the case, how can we rework that definition, that reality?

BK: When I read *LEARNING FROM THE VIRUS* I found it lacked an outlook, it felt too resigned. I disagreed with Preciado when he described a new subjectivity formed by COVID-19, one that does not engage in anything, does not exchange physically, gather or collectivize but just consumes, leaving only digital traces. Rereading it now, I find he does suggest something relevant in the text. In the end he envisions a collective of human and non-human alike and I agree with him that

> Contrary to what one might imagine, our health will not come from a border or separation, but only from a new understanding of community with all living creatures, a new sharing with other beings on the planet. We need a parliament not defined in terms of the politics of identity or nationality: a parliament of (vulnerable) bodies living on planet Earth. (Preciado 2020)

COVID-19 is attacking the most vulnerable of us: the elderly, those that identify as disabled, criminalized and incarcerated people, homeless bodies and essential workers, but also all our not-human-enough companions and cohabitants. If the question is «How can we assist each other through the violence of a patriarchal and neoliberal capitalist understanding of the family, care, education and health?» we do need to include all the vulnerable bodies that are threatened by neoliberal capitalism and its infrastructures (pipelines and mines, dams and refineries alike) and be aware of our wider relationship to ecology.

OA: I suppose it's interesting to reflect on how our relationship to our surroundings and non-human cohabitants has changed over the last year. Months of confinement saw the return of birds and mineral growth that is usually repelled by our presence, and I do think those months made us reconsider our impact on ecology. Weeks later ,the outdoors became the only space in which to exercise and socialize – fresh air equates safety. Regarding your question of how we can assist each other, I think it's important to recognize that these ways of being – assisting each other through the violence of a patriarchal and neoliberal capitalist understanding of the family – have been practiced by queer, disabled and/or chronically ill

communities for years – practices which the pandemic has forced others to consider. We've experienced a turning towards each other; a checking in on neighbors, supporting local businesses, congregating online, groups/communities organizing differently, picking up shopping or delivering medicine to vulnerable individuals self-isolating (see for example, https://covidmutualaid.org/) The optimist in me hopes that, once the pandemic is over, we don't all fall back into the neo-liberal trap of care as the responsibility of the individual, but continue to take forward these new (for some) habits of communality and interdependence and – this extends to our relationship with the planet – remember that the outdoor space we share with non-human beings needs to be protected, encouraged and understood with a new awareness of vulnerability. This also takes me to an excerpt from Sophie Lewis' recent lecture «Low-Tech Grassroots Ectogenesis / ‹I Think That Will Not Be A Problem›» where she examines «interdependency»:

> We are all the makers of one another, and/but we need help with that burden. None of us is the sole maker of another. Paradoxically, «real» family feeling may only be possible when one is forced to encounter the other as a stranger: when the stranger's interdependence with oneself is made visible by various comradely prostheses and devices. We go to great lengths to keep the co-gestationality of society invisible. However discomfortingly, since the beginning of the coronavirus lockdown, the realities of both the human body's interconnectedness and private property's deathliness have threatened to intrude on public consciousness. (Feminism Against Family - a lecture and discussion with Sophie Lewis, https://www.patreon.com/posts/i-think-that-not-43924567).

BK: Regarding these family feelings and family failings, Preciado uses an interesting metaphor in his text «Athens Teen Spirit,» which he wrote in 2016 and published in his book *An Apartment on Uranus* (2018). He uses the structure of the nuclear family to talk about a failing Greek government. The police state functions as the abusive father and the welfare state as the withdrawn mother, while the teenage boys and girls – the teenage multitude – are the protestors, demonstrators. «The demonstrations, fires and strikes in Greece are however, the sign of the impossibility of completely destroying the processes of resistance. … The time has come to invent a political form that short-circuits the patriarchal models of power and government. We must abandon the father's house, we must stop waiting for the mother. Exárcheia must be able to live.» (Preciado, 2019, pp. 209-210)

OA: It's an incredibly vivid familial metaphor which reminds me that when we started this conversation you were putting together a screening and lecture program with Rose Anne Gush and Sophie Lewis at mumok Vienna titled «Feminism against Family» [https://www.mumok.at/en/cinema/feminism-against-family], and Sophie's lecture mentioned earlier was published in part on Brand-New-Life [b-n-l/low-tech-grassroots-ectogenesis/]. The screening included films by Maria Lassnig, Tala Madani, Martha Rosler and Annette Kennerly.

BK: Yes, one of the films we showed was Maria Lassnigs short film *Bärbl*, which is really interesting to talk about in terms of a kind of «diagnosis of the provincial Austrian family,» as Rose-Anne described it in our introduction. Maria Lassnig follows the character of Bärbl, who is also her friend. The descriptions of Bärbl's life, including – in a very casual style – the toxic nightmare of the heteronormative nuclear family, are nothing less than brutal.



Bärbl smoking by the lake in Maria Lassnigs film *Bärbl*, film still, 1973

What exists beyond this brutal, constricting, prison of family, this idealized form of social organization, this idealized love that is inflected with the laws of patriarchal capitalism?

Janie's Janie produced by The Newsreel Collective is another film that might function here as an important reference for the dilemma of the nuclear household shifting into forms of a more communal caring for each other and with each other. It is an extraordinary, beautifully and collaboratively made document of the early 1970's women's movement. It follows Jane Giese, a working-class woman in Newark. Janie recounts her abusive marriage, and the limitations placed upon her and her children because of her economic situation. She invites us to follow her on the way to empowerment, the realization that she has to end the abusive relationships. She says, «First I was my father's Janie, then I was my Charlie's Janie, now I'm Janie's Janie.» We see her cooking, smoking, taking care of her children while giving interviews. The film ends with Janie partnering with other single moms to start a day-care program. Filmed in a post-1967-riots Newark, it is also a document of the efforts of interracial and feminist movements.



Janie Giese in *Janie's Janie* by The Newsreel Collective, film still, 1971

OA: You also screened Tala Madani's *The Womb*, which was a kind of a dark but humorous note to end on. Madani made a series of new works towards the end of last year including a painting titled *Grounded Mother*(2020). I'm bringing this up now as it echoes earlier exchanges around fluids, leakiness and excess: the figure in the image, the mother, can be seen squatting in her own shit. The title of the work is both in harmony and at odds with what it is depicting. On the one hand, «grounded» alludes to close to the ground, the earth, animal and excrement; on the other hand, the image of a mother naked and shitting is not the kind of normative «grounded» behavior we have come to expect from the maternal figure. In *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva argues that «Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the nonego, society threatened by its outside, life by ¬death.» (Kristeva 1982, p. 71) Madani's painting offers us a moment in which behavior and desires are unrestrained by conventions and social norms, giving us an alternate depiction of domestic life and the biological ties / corporealities of motherhood.



Tala Madani, *Grounded Mother*, 2020, Oil on linen, 139,7 x 111,8 cm

BK: I'd like to shift slightly towards technology's role in all of this, not only its part when it comes to care (especially in terms of e-learning, home-schooling, remote work during this pandemic), but also its leakiness when it comes to our connectedness and our privacy and safety during this time of reorganizing public and private life online. So maybe we can also ask: What does radical care look like both on and away from our screens? What communal use of tools and technology are we witnessing? And how can we navigate our media devices that are constantly leaking our most private information when at the same time this leakiness is the requirement for any communal online life?

OA: I think there are a few things here; on the one hand we have technology operating as a gateway to an alternate life, a much-needed space in which people can collectivize and access new imaginaries. Then there's access – only some have access to these tools but urgently require them as home schooling and/or working from home become obligatory. And while technology takes on this leading role, with digital space becoming the primary place for encounter, I think it's important to remember technology's other role in the pandemic: that of

monitoring and surveilling the spread of the virus through the movement of bodies across the globe, a track and trace system of «media-cybernetic control.» (Preciado 2020)

BK: Yes. We might say that we are witnessing the comeback of a society of control. As well as, speaking now with Preciado, the emergence of a new subjectivity that is constantly monitoring and controlling itself. During this pandemic, politics tries to force us back into nuclear family structures, and forms of sociality such as partying and club culture have come to a total halt. All we have left is an online space, it seems. At the same time there are those spaces that have emancipated themselves from consumerism and control and become places of activism, queerness, and world-making. Besides this, new online life has provided access to artistic and cultural production for a lot of people for whom attending events has never been an easy possibility in the first place. This should be used as a reminder for active inclusionary practice once the possibilities to meet IRL open up again – to stay aware of how we exclude people that are bound to their homes because of their illnesses/access requirements. While we remain isolated, can we dream about what kind of cultural life we want to have once isolation is over?

OA: Yeah, I think it's interesting what you're saying about where we locate politics or, more specifically, where our politics becomes visible, that it might be in more widely understood forms of street-based activism and/or protest, or online or in the club. Something that, I think, underpins all of this is our understanding or our assumptions of what's private space and what's public – it's something that the pandemic has further blurred. We've been told to stay at home by governments across the world, while experiencing an urgency to take to the streets in response to the violence and murder carried out by the same state. However, I don't think it's helpful to see these two things as polarities – care underpins both: you care for others / keep them safe by staying home and containing the virus / but also take to the streets (physically and online), and show up. And, what's crucial here is this visibility

BK: In «Go Outside. Hannah Black's Year in Review» written for the December 2020 issue of *Artforum*, Hannah Black describes in amazing simplicity how the George Floyd uprisings triggered a resurrection of the dead spaces of New York, and the pleasure of being outside, with strangers, taking the streets and being together.

> All riots emit a world-historical shine, but the George Floyd uprisings were extra radiant because they opened the doors of the world. The riots saved social life by proving that it was possible, with masks and moving air, to spend time together outdoors without getting sick. The riots reconstructed an outside of the home as they enacted an outside of capitalist social relations. (Black 2020)

But the lines are so blurry. Who can really afford to leave the home? Who can be safe outside? And who can afford to stay at home? Also – whose streets [https://thenewinquiry.com/whose-streets/]? COVID-19 regulations increased domestic violence as well as repressions and violence against the most vulnerable, the ones without homes, jobs, security, and papers. At the same time, we witnessed police violence against Black Lives Matter protests and demonstrations against deportations in the US and Europe, as well as COVID-19 deniers, Pro-Trumpists and Neo-Nazis who took to public space with little interference from the police.

OA: Again, there's a very blurry dynamic at play here. In order for ourselves and others to stay alive, we have to keep our distance / «stay at home,» but who has the privilege to stay home? This doesn't just refer to protest: Whose job allows them to stay home? I think this question and the issues of who can leave the house and what protest looks like are really important to dwell on – they introduce a nuance and an understanding of the temporalities and

demands of difference. I'm reminded of Johanna Hedva's «Sick Woman Theory» as well as their text exploring the relationship between language, time and illness on Get Well Soon [https://getwellsoon.labr.io/].



Screenshot from the *Get Well Soon* webpage by Sam Lavigne and Tega Brain showing a text fragment by Johanna Hedva

> In late 2014, I was sick with a chronic condition that, about every 12 to 18 months, gets bad enough to render me, for about five months each time, unable to walk, drive, do my job, sometimes speak or understand language, take a bath without assistance, and leave the bed. This particular flare coincided with the Black Lives Matter protests, which I would have attended unremittingly, had I been able to. I live one block away from MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, a predominantly Latino neighborhood and one colloquially understood to be the place where many immigrants begin their American lives. The park, then, is not surprisingly one of the most active places of protest in the city.
>
> I listened to the sounds of the marches as they drifted up to my window. Attached to the bed, I rose up my sick woman fist, in solidarity.
>
> I started to think about what modes of protest are afforded to sick people – it seemed to me that many for whom Black Lives Matter is especially in service, might not be able to be present for the marches because they were imprisoned by a job, the threat of being fired from their job if they marched, or literal incarceration, and of course the threat of violence and police brutality – but also because of illness or disability, or because they were caring for someone with an illness or disability.
>
> I thought of all the other invisible bodies, with their fists up, tucked away and out of sight. (Hedva 2020)

BK: Yes, and I think this speaks to the importance of digital space as a place where protest could take place, where activism is happening. We are still in this together. I want to add here a quote by Legacy Russell from her publication *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. The reason the Internet still matters, Russell says, is because «the Internet still provides opportunity for queer propositions for new modalities of being and newly proposed worlds.» (Russell 2020, p. 123) We might be the human bodies operating within hi-tech spaces of mass control Preciado

describes («We are digital consumers equipped with credit cards, … we leave voicemails and have masks, … codes, pixels, bank accounts, doors without names…»), but we do also gather together and we do collectivize. (Preciado 2019, pp. 209-210).

> Despite the loss of innocence that has come with the shift in understanding of how our digital traces might be manipulated, capitalized on, and deployed, the increased presence of intersectional bodies that transcend the bureaucratic violence of a single-box tick remains a key component of why the Internet still matters. Though far from its promise of utopia, the Internet still provides opportunity for queer propositions for new modalities of being and newly proposed worlds. … The Internet remains a club space for the collective congregation of marginalized voices and bodies when all else fails [and] continues to be a place of immense intimacy, where an «opening up» of being can occur, and where one can dare to be vulnerable. (Russell 2020, p. 123)

OA: What Russell overcomes, and I think this is really important, is the tendency to speak of «intimacy» in relation to proximity and touch – physically and spatially – which is of course superficial. My most intimate and reflective conversations have taken place at a time when I've been confined to my own private sphere away from, and unable to see, others.

> Intimacy, understood in terms of degrees of proximity, is symptomatic of operating in a world where surfaces are taken to be boundaries, as monolithic concretions. But when we begin to see more clearly that surfaces are in fact these zones or localities of iridescently shifting, at-once-elusive-and-alluring shining—projecting into the space of the given reality and undermining its hegemony—intimacy becomes the drive towards palpating, recognizing, appropriating these heterotopic regions. Surface becomes a localization of stereoscopy, a site where the perennial problem of appearance and reality is rehearsed….
>
> ... The surface deepens in that it reveals itself to be not merely the apparent integument but a site of the rehearsal of the negotiations between the apparent and the real, where things at once operate through seeming to be and being that seeming, through the chiasmic intertwining of reality and appearance and the scintillating undermining of the hegemony of both. We are no longer subjects of and to touch, in the sense of blunt contact with the other, but rather in each experience of encounter, we are always already emitting the glow of our interiority and basking in the iridescently shared shine of transintimacy. (Tavi Meraud, *e-flux* 61, January 2015).

As Tavi Meraud argues in the quote above, if we move beyond the surface as boundary – that includes screens and skins – and understand these spaces as places for projection where touch, contact and physical encounter are secondary to an experience of interiority, we can unlock a new mode of shared intimacy that operates in the spaces between.



Still from Sophie Lewis' talk «Mothering Against The World», that was part of the 3d RIBOCA Riga Biennale, 2020

BK: Maybe we are returning to where we started at the beginning of this conversation, to the liquid matter, the spilling over boundaries, the leakiness of care. In her beautiful talk «Mothering Against The World» [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LgANX1CVso] for the Riga Biennale, Sophie Lewis calls for communities of care based on comradeliness rather than the metaphors of the nuclear bio-fam.

She quotes Sheila Heti who in her 2018 book *Motherhood* says that «one doesn´t have a child, one does it» and goes on explaining this reformulation of the tensions articulated in Adrienne Rich´s 1979 classic *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* between liberatory kinmaking that is mothering on one side and anti-liberatory privatization that is motherhood on the other. Reminding us of the dialectics of mothering against motherhood, the competing thoughts of mother as institution versus mother as verb, is crucial. To think of oneself as someone who mothers someone else, be it a child or a parent or someone close in need of a motherer. To be aware that mothering is dependent on situations and constellations and not on private property. The question is how to live and die well with each other. Mothering and care then have to go beyond nuclear kin.

> While the fantasy of «blood» relationality is that it makes adopting one another unnecessary, in reality, as I sought to argue in the book, children never belong to us, their makers, in the first place. The fabric of the social is something we 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. Kinship, in other words, is always made, not given. By the same token, where kinship is assumed, it fails to be made, more often than we think. I'm with McKenzie Wark, therefore, when she proposes reviving the ancient word ‹kith,› with its nebulous senses of the friend, neighbor, local, and the customary»; when she suggests the comradely rewrite of Haraway: «make kith, not kin!» (Lewis 2020)

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