

Disloyal Children of Shulamith Firestone

Updating Gestational Utopianism for the Twenty-First Century

SOPHIE LEWIS

There are different ways of being made to feel uncomfortable by texts and propositions. Often, feelings of discomfort stem from their lack of imagination and reproduction of the ever same. But some thinkers dare you to imagine that this world is but one of many. Sophie Lewis' theorising is one of the best examples of this second kind. As a 'disloyal comrade' she shares this intrepid rephrasing of questions, assumptions and ideas with Shulamith Firestone. In this keynote, originally presented at the *Politics of Reproduction Conference* in September 2021,¹ Sophie Lewis works with, against and beyond Firestone's gestational utopianism. Placing it in conversation with Black, queer and trans feminists she pulls us in the in-between spaces of their thought to think (and question) ourselves and the potential futures we seek. By way of doing this, she invites us all to be disloyal children whilst faithfully (un)building a future where children are free and the family as we know it is abolished; where we can dare to have access to love and safety, not just those rare 'lucky ones'; where gestational labour is liberated from the confines of the household and profit-focused (surrogacy) clinics; where Marilyn Monroe's epigrammatic and discerning contribution to the world is taken seriously and sincerely. The discussion after the talk brought out how challenging it is today (for most new students of Firestone and beyond) to not only see that this ordering of (familial) relations cannot continue to be, but to also engage in experiments of thinking unknowable, unpredictable and capacious otherwise ways of relating to each other. Sophie's talk brings back this sense of the old school utopian manifesto whilst at the same time not getting too caught up in the nostalgia that makes it so easy to see past its faults. By reprinting it here we hope to stoke the flames of collective creative imaginaries, since, as Sophie observes, 'it's existentially petrifying to imagine relinquishing the organized poverty we have in favor of an abundance we have never known and have yet to organize.'²

**N.B. portions of this lecture have been adapted from essays originally published in The Nation, brand new life and Dissent magazines, as well as the author's personal Patreon.*³

¹ The Politics of Reproduction Conference was held at the *Center for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics (CAPPE)* at the University of Brighton (conducted online), 15th – 17th of September 2021.

² This intro and the edits for the texts were prepared by Megan Borrman and Hannah Voegele.

³ Follow Sophie Lewis on twitter and patreon @reprotopia

I am going to speak today about gestational utopianism, and methods of disloyal comradeship vis-à-vis an anti-gestation utopian from half a century ago. In other words, I am going to present my perspective on *The Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone⁴—I was recently admonished by a close friend of Firestone's to take more care to pronounce it that way—which is a perspective I didn't have a chance to develop in full in my book *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family*.⁵

Teaching an online course about a utopian manifesto from the Sixties is a brutally effective way to illuminate the dystopianism of the pandemic-stricken present, let me tell you.⁶ Obviously, great surges of love and rage have hit the streets again and again over the past few years, disrupting the unlivable, carceral, care-poor reality that is America, for most of its denizens.⁷ As these waves of abolitionism crested, for example last summer, summer of 2020, one could almost catch a glimpse of what it might have felt like in 1968, when everything seemed on the table; suddenly, the restraint of a lot of what passes for 21st-century radicalism was illuminated. It is especially instructive, I feel, to look at the utopias of that bygone, almost-revolutionary era right now, during the late-stage (let's hope!) pandemic. Because, as Michael Bronski says, it can be difficult to appreciate the kinds of ideas that were “not fringe.”⁸ When our culture revisits Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* today, for example, it skates past that book's heavy emphasis on children having no rights, no money, and hence no *sexual personhood* worth recognizing.⁹

It seems to me that the re-entrenchment of gender cynicism, of *nuclear familyism*, among other conservatisms, has lately crept up on many of us, without us fully noticing. Bestselling authors

⁴ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, (London: The Women's Press, 1979)

⁵ Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (London: Verso, 2019).

⁶ Sophie Lewis, 4-week course, „Shulamith Firestone: The Dialectic of Sex” at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research (e.g. March 2021).

⁷ E.g. see Vicky Osterweil and Zoé Samudzi, “Riots and abolition”, *The Brief Podcast*, July 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGRZlyr91XA&t=4s>.

⁸ Michael Bronski, „When Gays Wanted to Liberate Children “, *Boston Review*, June 8, 2018, <https://bostonreview.net/gender-sexuality/michael-bronski-when-gays-wanted-liberate-children>.

⁹ Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, (New York: Doubleday, 1970). See also George Chauncey, "The Post-War Sex Crime Panic." In *True Stories from the American Past*. Edited by William Graebner, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993). Or George Chauncey, "Trade, Wolves, and the Boundaries of Normal Manhood." In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

are touting eugenic “friendscaping“ and the running of one’s family “like a firm.”¹⁰ An overwhelming majority of today’s babies are being shaped in drastic, unheard-of privacy; reproductive laborers are at a breaking point; meanwhile, trans people—and victims of domestic violence generally—are suffering in silence, staying in the closet, unable to flee.

Who better to pierce the surreptitious, mind-numbing normalization of all this, under both Trump and Biden, than Shulie Firestone (who was a mere 23 years old in ‘68), with her scalding refusal of every “natural” premise of American society and her vision of a future in which children and adults together (having eliminated capitalism, work, and the sex distinction itself) democratically inhabit large, nongenetic households?

The Dialectic of Sex is a rare exemplar of what Ruth Levitas, following Fredric Jameson, has called utopia as method.¹¹ 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 with frustration, on the more humorless and overly literal-minded among Firestone’s readers.¹² 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.

I do not claim to be as funny as Firestone, though I do try to put jokes in all my writing, be it about octopus erotics or the political economy of contract pregnancy.¹³ My instinct (as well as aspiration) has been to operate in the Firestonian-Harawavian mode of deadly serious laughing irony. This was perceived first by people other than myself: *Full Surrogacy Now* was an attempt to revive and reclaim Firestone’s utopianism of love. Her anti-family feminism, her revolutionary horizon of family abolition, is an inheritance I steal from her. I am, as you may

¹⁰ See Kate Murphy, “How to Rearrange Your Post-Pandemic ‘Friendscape’”, *The New York Times*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/01/well/family/curate-friends.html>, Emily Oster, *The Family Firm: A Data-Driven Guide to Better Decision Making in the Early School Years*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021).

¹¹ Ruth Levinas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹² Kathi Weeks; *The Vanishing Dialectic: Shulamith Firestone and the Future of the Feminist 1970s*. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 1 October 2015; 114 (4): 735–754. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3157111>

¹³ E.g. see Sophie Lewis, „My Octopus Girlfriend: On Erotophobia”, *N+1* magazine, 39, Winter 2021, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-39/reviews/my-octopus-girlfriend/>. Sophie Lewis, “Cyborg Uterine Geography: Complicating ‘Care’ and Social Reproduction.” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 8, no. 3 (November 2018): 300–316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820618804625>.

know, incredibly disloyal to her legacy.¹⁴ But I am, at the same time, I hope, a faithful comrade of hers. Comradeliness is not the same as friendship—it carries an even stronger imperative, I think, to name and oppose reactionary missteps. I am a critical Firestonist, even if there were equally-if-not-more-important trans and gay liberationist, indigenous anti-couple-form and Black feminist sources for my (reworked) family abolitionism.

Abolish the family? You might as well abolish gravity, or abolish god. So! The left is trying to take grandma away, now, and confiscate kids, and this is supposed to be progressive? Many people experience a reaction something like this, upon first encountering the phrase “abolish the family.” And that’s okay. Firestone does not deny, nor does she shy away from the slogan’s explosive emotional freight. This same scariness is present in all real revolutionary politics, in her view. People’s trepidation is a reaction to the intimation of abolishment of the self. Our trepidation arises from the knowledge that all of us—even those of us who own no property, receive no guaranteed care, and subsist at the blunt end of empire, whiteness, cis-hetero-patriarchy, and class—will have to let go of something as the process of our collective liberation unfolds. If the world is to be remade utterly, then a person must (however reluctantly, I think we can all sense this...) be willing to be remade also. Right now, in other words, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine not being manufactured through the oedipal kinship story (mother figure, father figure, child) and the private nuclear household. Yet personhood was not always created this way, which means we could, if we wanted to, create it otherwise.

In the meantime, as I tell people, if your kneejerk reaction to the words “abolish the family,” is “but I love my family,” you ought to know that you are one of the lucky ones. And I am happy for you. But everyone should be so lucky, don’t you think? Loving the people in your family, mind you, is not at odds with family abolitionism. Quite the reverse. I will hazard a definition: to love a person is to struggle actively for their total immersion in care, insofar such abundance is possible in a world choked by capital. If this is true, then restricting the number of mothers (of any gender) to whom a child has access, on the basis that I am the “real” mother, is not necessarily a form of love worthy of the name. Nor is it a liberatory form of love, in my view,

¹⁴ Sophie Lewis, “Shulamith Firestone Wanted to Abolish Nature—We Should, Too”, *The Nation*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/shulamith-firestone-dialectic-sex/>, Sophie Lewis, “Mothering Against the World: Momrades Against Motherhood”, *Salvage*, Issue 8, September 18, 2020, <https://salvage.zone/articles/mothering-against-the-world-momrades-against-motherhood/>.

that places automatic restrictions on somebody's sexuality, spending, location, or loyalties via the institution of marriage. Perhaps, when you were very young (assuming you grew up in a nuclear household), you quietly noticed the oppressiveness of the function assigned to the "mother" in that space and sensed her loneliness. Perhaps you felt a twinge of solidarity. In my experience, children often "get" this better than most: when you love someone, it simply makes no sense to endorse a social technology that isolates them; privatizes their lifeworld; arbitrarily assigns their dwelling-place, class, and very identity in law; and drastically circumscribes their sphere of intimate, interdependent ties.

Let me tell you a secret: people get really angry when you suggest to them that they deserved better than what they got, growing up. I've noticed that a lot of people have the "but I love my family" reaction with startling vehemence right after they've spent a long time talking freely to me about the strain, tragedy, blackmail and care paucity that characterized their "biological" upbringing, or shared their wish that relatives of theirs could have been less alone, less burdened by caring responsibilities, less, less trapped. Sure, it may be a disciplinary, scarcity-based trauma-machine, this defensive spasm seems to say, but it's MY disciplinary, scarcity-based trauma-machine. Listen: I get it. It's not just that you're worried about your dad getting all upset if he sees you with this book. It's that it's existentially petrifying to imagine relinquishing the organized poverty we have in favor of an abundance we have never known and have yet to organize.

The idea of abolishing the family is actually very old (Plato wrote *The Republic* around 375 BC; and Fourier first imagined "feminism" and the "phalanstery" two hundred years ago). As mentioned, there have been certain periods of time (including the Sixties and Seventies) when relatively many people were familiar with it. In a forthcoming pamphlet for Verso Books entitled *Beyond the Family: The Case for Abolition*, I dig into the history of family abolitionism, which includes nineteenth-century French utopians, Marx and Engels's "infamous proposal," thwarted Bolshevik commissars like Alexandra Kollontai, mid-century gay power, children's liberationists, feminist radicals, rowdy welfare recipients, and queer Indigenous and Black militants, to name but a few. I grapple with the question of whether family abolitionists in the 21st century should take pains to specify that they mean the "white" or "bourgeois" or "nuclear" family—not, in other words, your complex, financially struggling, queer and/or racially

marginalized kinship network. Should we take the line that there is no family other than the white, nuclear, bourgeois family, in a structural sense?

Certainly, there are massive differences between white ruling-class and, on the other hand, black proletarian (or colonized) people's relationships to the family. Some historical scholars describe "the Black family" as an oxymoron. Others reject the idea that "abolishing the family" is desirable for nonwhite groups and oppressed classes. Is calling for family abolition compatible, as Lola Olufemi believes, with treasuring techniques and traditions of mutual survival developed by colonized, or formerly enslaved, people? Tiffany Lethabo King thinks so: "While I critique the family and am committed to addressing its limitations—even its elimination—I celebrate the creative ways that Black descendants of captive communities continue to reinvent and conceptualize relationships."¹⁵

Kathi Weeks has recently argued, and I agree with her, that abolition of the family is *the* infamous proposal of the feminists. But ever since the long 1960s, the vast majority of Western feminists and leftists have tried to *walk back* this demand to "abolish the family"—as Weeks aptly puts it.¹⁶ Feminism has backed away from the demand to fully deprivatize care. We have hastened to reassure our distressed and outraged audiences that we aren't anti-family; in fact, we want more family, not less!

Perhaps this capitulation, this rhetorical sleight of hand, is understandable. After all, distinguishing families from "the family" is an unfamiliar maneuver. Families may be where capitalism gets resuscitated each day for free, and where the vast majority of queerphobic and sexualized violence takes place, but they are also often the only bulwarks against racism and alienation many people have. To criticize the family in the contemporary political landscape is to be understood as nihilistically anti-relational at best and, at worst, racist—presumably because nonwhite groups are more dedicated to (or dependent upon) family than white.

¹⁵ Tiffany Lethabo King, Black 'Feminisms' and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan's Negro Family, *Theory & Event*, Volume 21, No. 1, January 2018, pp. 68-87, 86.

¹⁶ Kathi Weeks. "Abolition of the Family: The Most Infamous Feminist Proposal." *Feminist Theory*, (May 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211015841>.

And it's true that the regulatory fantasy of the nuclear family is upheld zealously, even religiously, as a cultural value by almost every existing ethnic group (certain Indigenous peoples are a notable exception to this). But that doesn't mean that the family isn't structurally implicated in ethnic and class hierarchies. Far from "just" harmful to women and children, the family as such, with its exclusions, extortions, and arbitrary rationings of care, is spiritually deleterious for all. But it has especially (and materially) lethal consequences for Black and brown, im/migrant, Indigenous, poor, and working-class queer, trans, feminized, sex-working, and gender nonconforming people—whose needs, desires, and modes of survival it pathologizes and devalues.

The privatization of care and safety into the family household, like the state-imposed norms of the couple-form and the biogenetic model for registering responsibility and rights over children, should be seen as a continuation of an older project of advancing whiteness and producing a well-ordered productive labor force. Understanding this might help us see through the false universalism of "family values," whereby America purports to stand for "keeping families together" (a flawed principle in itself, especially for queer youth whose biological kin want to kill them) but then tortures and rips apart the nonwhite family at the border.

Since at least the late 1970s, a rich tradition of radicalism in America has emanated from the margins of the regime of kinship-as-property, including movements of lesbian welfare recipients and domestic workers in a struggle for families but also against and beyond the family. Many participants at the first National Conference of Third World Lesbians and Gays in 1979, for example, boldly rejected the premise that children are the property of one or two or any number of parents, advancing instead the notion that everyone already has—yet at the same time needs and deserves—many mothers. One caucus announced, unforgettably, "All children of lesbians are ours."¹⁷

But back to Firestone. "Shulie" (as she was known to her friends in her youth), a Chicago art-school graduate and subsequent New Yorker, deemed the overthrowing of class, work, and markets to be a self-evidently necessary task, barely worth defending. What really interested

¹⁷ E.g. see Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "m/other ourselves: a Black queer feminist genealogy for radical mothering", in *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, edited by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens and Mai'a Williams, (San Francisco: PM Press, 2016), 23.

her, instead, was the abolition of culture and nature, no less: starting with patriarchal “love” and its “culture of romance” on the one hand, and pregnancy on the other. Besides editing and producing the short-lived, self-published militant (and millenarian) women’s liberation journal *Notes*, Shulie cofounded several revolutionary groups—New York Radical Women, Redstockings, and New York Radical Feminists—which sometimes carried out direct actions targeting, for instance, a Miss America pageant and a Manhattan bridal fair. She then published her book-length manifesto, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, through (controversially) a mainstream press.

In this magnum opus, she advocates for “the abolition of the labor force itself under a cybernetic socialism” and “the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women.” Ectogenesis—the machine uterus—is famously a part of this speculative picture, and I have sought to continue her project of taking ectogenic technology seriously by poking around the BioBag research facility in the hospital near where I live in Philadelphia, where neonatal sheep are being brought to term in remarkably low-tech polyethylene bags full of artificial amniotic fluid. *Low tech grassroots ectogenesis*, for the purposes *not* of saving preemies, but rather of enabling gestators simply to stop working if they choose, is an important demand, in my view.

But above all, Firestone contends, women must liberate children and themselves from the capitalist patriarchy—seizing control over technology, eradicating the tyranny of work, automating labor (yes, even reproductive labor, as far as possible), and shedding the gender binary and incest taboo such that play, love, and sexuality might “[flow] unimpeded.”

While sharing several of Firestone’s feminist commitments, the philosopher Hortense Spillers was devastating in her takedown of *The Dialectic of Sex’s* failure to imagine nonwhite women’s liberation, as well as the contempt for Black nationalism displayed in Firestone’s regrettable Chapter 5. The chapter in question is titled “Racism: The Sexism of the Family of Man,” and undeniably, it deserves everything Black feminists have said about it. Despite having denounced Freudianism as “misguided” in Chapter 3, Firestone here disregards slavery, colonialism, and any historical-materialist basis for white supremacy, instead explaining it as a psychological and fundamentally “sexual phenomenon” that mimics the Oedipus complex. Black men are the sons in the American national family, she posits lazily, hence they are driven

to kill the white man (Dad) and rape his white wife. In her deconstruction of the “myth of the Black rapist” in *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis politely summarizes this theoretical clusterfuck thus: “Firestone succumbs to the old racist sophistry of blaming the victim.” Spillers is less polite: “Is this writer doing comedy here, or have we misread her text?”

Alas, the presentation of racial stereotypes as psychological portraits of individual members of the so-called “Family of Man” is not intentionally a part of Firestone’s extensive (and sometimes excellent) comedy.

Blind to both queer urban and nonmonogamous Indigenous lifeways, Firestone misses the fundamentally racial character of the production of cis-heterosexual gender in post-Reconstruction America, and the flaw is fatal to her whole project. She was not wrong, of course, that canonical Marxists and ’60s New Left “politicos” failed to attend properly to the spheres of sex/gender, baby-making, the colonially imposed nuclear family, and romance. But the horizon that so motivated her—the “explosion” of American culture in its entirety—is ultimately unimaginable without the abolition of whiteness, which she ignores. The twinned institutions of childhood and motherhood, upon which culture rests, according to her, were after all forged within white supremacy, as Spillers so aptly showed in 1987 in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”¹⁸ In other words, when Firestone talks about eliminating “the” sex distinction, she is eliding, under the sign of everywoman, what is really a multiplicity of racialized sexes and gender oppressions. Women do not all have the same gender. “The” utopia-bound dialectic of sex, if we should try to diagram it (as Shulie, believe it or not, did... on a “Prestype” system), is probably four-dimensional.

It is not up to me to excuse or “forgive” chapter 5. On page 1 of the text, however, if you do make it that far (knowing what you now know about the whole), there is a very compelling idea: namely, that the fundamental categories we use to think about historical change “are not big enough.” If we are generously inclined, *The Dialectic of Sex* can serve as a reminder that the wretched of the earth can and must harness science, remake nature, and unleash universal equality and joy.

¹⁸ Hortense J Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

Technologies exist, Firestone plausibly affirms, that could—if the proletariat wanted—equitably distribute, reduce, and perhaps eventually dissolve the burden of drudgery entirely. She affirms up front her wish for a word more all-embracing than “revolution” for the playful, orgiastic scenario she has in mind. Preempting her aghast technophobic critics—who nevertheless (for 50 years!) have never deigned to see past her positivity vis-à-vis artificial wombs—Firestone declares straight up that an intensification of capitalism, namely “The 1984 Nightmare,” is highly likely if control over reproductive technologies continues to be wielded by the ruling classes and isn’t stormed from below. I appreciate Vicky Margree’s insistence on this point in her excellent book, *Neglected or Misunderstood: The Radical Feminism of Shulamith Firestone*.¹⁹

The flawed *Dialectic*, in all its immortal exuberance, priceless drollery, and anguished seriousness, remixes Engels, Marx, Freud, Hegel, Beauvoir, and the kibbutz, combining high metaphysics—couched conversationally, almost as stand-up comedy—with the visceral phenomenological observations that “childbirth isn’t good for you” and “childhood is hell.” Immediately after its release in 1970, heartbreakingly, Firestone deserted the world of politics for good. Her big second book, intended to “lay the foundations of a powerful new women’s art—with the potential to transform our very definition of culture”—never arrived.

Instead, in 1998, a follow-up text appeared at last: *Airless Spaces*, a tiny, fragmentary, despair-filled collection of stories about the psychiatric incarceration of Shulie and other inmates.²⁰ Toward the end of that volume, under the heading “I Remember Valerie,” the author dedicates a couple of pages to a non-comrade—the “matriarchalist” Valerie Solanas, who “waxed paranoid” at her once long ago and had, she’d said, loathed *The Dialectic*. “It was many years before I heard of her again,” Firestone concludes. “Then it was just an obituary stating that she had been found in a San Francisco hotel dead of lung disease.” In 2012, Shulie died alone, too, in her apartment, still presumably waiting for the right term, more all-encompassing than “revolution,” to be invented.

¹⁹ Victoria Margree, *Neglected or Misunderstood: The Radical Feminism of Shulamith Firestone*, (Hampshire, UK: Zero Books, 2018).

²⁰ Shulamith Firestone, *Airless Spaces*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

Rereading *The Dialectic of Sex* over half a century after it was written, I am angered by its travesty of a critical race analysis and amazed at its silence on colonized, lesbian, gay, and trans people, the pioneers of struggles in and against the family. I am disappointed with its middle-classness and its disgust at the pregnant body (what Margree, following Elizabeth Spelman, calls somatophobia). I am unimpressed with the *Dialectic's* conflation of femaleness and gestational labor; and embarrassed by its complete inattention to sex work, empire, disability, and queer life generally. A disloyal daughter to all family abolitionists who came before me, I actually disagree with more of Firestone's individual points than not. But I see something of my late mother in her biography, and I love—sometimes to the point of weeping—her book's absolute negationism, its horniness, and its sincerity. I support utterly its program of doing away with marriage along with all forms of propertarian kinship. Through a wrinkle in time, I lay claim to Shulie, lovingly, irritatedly. I hold in my heart, without quite understanding it, her commitment to realizing “the conceivable in the actual.”

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. 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.”²¹ Yet, alongside this frustrated antipathy toward the corporeal—insofar as it appears given, unpliant—it is also precisely the technological fleshiness, libidinal sensuousness of the cyborg that emerges from *The Dialectic*: “a form of embodied utopia,” Caroline Bassett calls it.²² Firestone is “not seduced by the prospect of that technologically achieved divorce from the body that so engaged later cyberfeminism,” Bassett notes. In other words, the problem of pregnancy shall never for Firestone 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.

²¹ Donna Haraway, “Animal Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body Politic, Part I: A Political Physiology of Dominance.” *Signs* 4, no. 1 (1978): 21–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173323>.

²² Caroline Bassett, *Impossible, Admirable, Androgyne: Firestone, Technology, and Utopia*. In: Merck M., Sandford S. (eds) *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex. Breaking Feminist Waves*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230109995_5.

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.”²³

Some of us desire to gestate, yet here we are stuck in this world of infernal gestational working conditions. Some of us desire to gestate, and lack the biological organs to do so.

To be clear, an antiwork approach is not prescriptive. It seeks to share out the burden of necessary labor to the maximal point, such that its work characteristics are minimized. An antiwork approach seeks to generate the conditions of possibility for people to perform the labors they wish to perform, including extreme sports such as pregnancy that makes use of, as it does in our species, a hemochorial placenta. There is nothing that so stifles our lives as the transformation into work of that which satisfies our desires. By the same token, rejecting the gender division of labor as Firestone did, leads us directly to a demand for uterine transplants to be made immediately and freely available to trans women who want them to gestate with.

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). 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.

In her essay ‘Is a Cervix Cis?’ Emma Heaney lays out the knowledge garnered during “her year in the stirrups” enduring monthly medicalized intrauterine inseminations to prove she qualified for IVF coverage.²⁴ As the essay unfolds, Heaney weaves in the solidarities of half a dozen gendernauts.

Some of these friends are women, some are not women. My love for them creates a bond that affects how I feel about my body and makes me want to protect theirs.

These affinities, rather than anything inherent in the cervix, are the substance of Heaney’s sense of her sex identity, “of what embodiment itself means.” The point, as Heaney finds it, is that “history has created these bonds between and among our bodies.” And history, like kinship, is made.

To return to the fight for abortion (which, in my view, should be defended as a form of killing *that is also* a basic and banal form of healthcare *that is also* a withdrawal of labor): we face today an ethical imperative not just to liberate the producers AND products of gestational labor from the private nuclear household, but also to create conditions in which humans are empowered to say no to gestating if they want to, especially 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. It is absurd, frankly, to expect a person to do pregnancy.

Firestone’s 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.

²⁴ Emma Heaney, „Is a Cervix Cis?: My Year in the Stirrups”, *Asterix Journal*, February 18, 2021, <https://asterixjournal.com/is-a-cervix-cis/>.

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

I am persuaded by Madeline Lane-McKinley's argument: that Firestone should 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."²⁵

This all might sound somewhat romanticizing. 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 surely just as much a part of the "unthinkable" into which we are throwing ourselves when we step into that struggle. Madeline is clear on this. These desolate, anti-erotic vistas represent possible outcomes—likely ones, even. That's part of the wager.

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)! Every hitherto existing attempt at something approaching the revolutionary care commune, she is clear, has been grossly inadequate.

Luckily, in part thanks to her, we *do* undeniably have gestational utopian literature, and we do have speculative fictions.

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

²⁵ Madeline Lane-McKinley; *The Dialectic of Sex*, after the Post-1960s. *Cultural Politics* 1 November 2019; 15 (3): 331–342. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-7725479>.

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.

In an essay about another hilarious, well-read woman who died lonely and mad in her apartment—Marilyn Monroe—the artist Audrey Wollen writes about the gift she and her friends feel they received from Monroe's brief, incendiary contribution to human history: "Tending to our impossibilities, we offered those around us both the negative, the zero, and its accompanying wish. That's what Marilyn gave us."²⁶ Part of what Wollen is saying here, I think, is that the urgent destruction of this world, and the desire for a common life, are caught up in, well, a dialectic. And if so, then that is what Shulie gave us too, I feel: a literal map ("for that rare diagram freak")—though it's partly a joke—charting the way to a place where it would be possible to be a heterosexual feminist, a femme intellectual, and a comrade child.

Blind spots and all, Shulie Firestone merits revisiting in the age of coronavirus because she defamiliarizes (not to say guffaws at) the very building blocks of contemporary capitalism—notably the private nuclear household—that the experience of Covid-19 can, despite everything, teach us to call into question. While the sanctuary of "family" and the individuality of gestating have on one level grown ever more invisible and unquestionable under the United States' botched waves of quarantine, lockdown, and de-masking, the necessity of class consciousness, care revolution, and children's liberation has also strained into view.

Down with the chauvinist micro-nationalism of family values, said Shulie—which has been echoed by so many of us who discovered, via "stimulus" checks, that the sky does not fall when human survival is decoupled from the wage. Down with nationalism and the competitive micro-nations of family values, said Shulie: We are, transgenerationally, the makers of one another, the guardians of one another's health, the intimate aliens from a future that now suddenly seems worth trying for.

²⁶ Audrey Wollen, „Looking at Photographs of Marilyn Monroe Reading“, *affidavit*, February 25, 2019, <http://www.affidavit.art/articles/marilyn-monroe>.

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