

Feminism and Finitude

Alessandra Mularoni, PhD Candidate, University of Western Ontario

Abstract:

This essay examines the ideological parallels between the transhuman pursuit for immortality and xenofeminism's call for biological manipulation. Paying particular attention to the patriarchal legacy of technoscience, I identify eugenic principles embedded in the discursive emphasis on anti-naturalism, freedom, and alienation. My intention is to recuperate xenofeminism's more radical manoeuvres by resituating its aims through a historical materialist approach. Specifically, I suggest a reinterpretation of nature as inherently technological. In so doing, I argue for an alliance between xenofeminism and ecofeminist political economy to engage a discursive redirection toward degrowth and dealienation. I then build on Rosi Braidotti's (2013) posthuman theory of death to suggest an uncomfortable biopolitical expansion: a biopolitics for the Anthropocene should seek not only an equal right to live but also an equal predisposition to death. My countervailing materialism centres on a politics of finitude through an analysis of the vital-fatal entanglement in the body's reproductive capacities.

Keywords:

Transhumanism, xenofeminism, ecofeminism, eugenics, biopolitics, immortality, finitude

Our lot is cast with technoscience, where nothing is so sacred that it cannot be reengineered and transformed so as to widen our aperture of freedom, extending to gender and the human.... There is nothing, we claim, that cannot be studied scientifically and manipulated technologically.

—Laboria Cuboniks, “Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation”

Introduction

On the cusp of a new millennium, transhumanist Ray Kurzweil published what he described as a guide to the twenty-first century. *The Age of Spiritual Machines* maps the terrain of philosophical questions arising from advanced computation, including the potential for a “post-biological future.”¹ The argument for such a future has been propagated by transhumanism, equal parts philosophy and technoscientific practice that seek to “overcome many of the limitations of human biology.”² Although fantasies of immortality are intrinsic to the human condition—the Fountain of Youth and Elixir of Life date back to antiquity, and major religions espouse the promise of an afterlife—transhumanism has long identified death as a problem to be solved through technological advancement. As the epigraph of this essay reveals, xenofeminism (XF) is similarly preoccupied with the means of science and technology for supposedly liberatory ends.

My intervention begins by focusing on the discursive collisions between transhumanism and xenofeminism. Both projects marshal anti-naturalism to call attention to the social conventions inscribed on the human body and, in their broad formulations, emphasise a discourse of freedom that centres on autonomy and alienation. To be sure, they are also comprised of many iterations, sometimes conflicting. For instance, prominent transhumanist Max More argues that “religion acts as an entropic force, standing against our advancement into transhumanity and our future as posthumans.”³ On the other hand, the development of Mormon transhumanism “illustrate[s] how theology and technology overlap and intertwine in the deserts of the American West.”⁴ The regional locus, however, is worth

1 Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (New York: Viking, 1999), 14.

2 Jenny Huberman, “Old Men, Young Blood: Transhumanism and the Promise and Peril of Immortality,” in *The New Death: Mortality and Death Care in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Shannon Lee Dawdy and Tamara Kneese (Carol Stream: University of New Mexico Press, 2022), 55. Accessed December 16, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

3 Max More, “Transhumanism: Towards a Futurist Philosophy,” 1996, <https://ildodopensiero.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/max-more-transhumanism-towards-a-futurist-philosophy.pdf>.

4 Tamara Kneese and Benjamin Peters, “Mormon Mommies Will Never Die,” *Logic*, August 3, 2019, <https://logicmag.io/bodies/mormon-mommies-will-never-die/>.

noting; organised religion and commercial “new age” pursuits in the sciences (e.g., biohacking and cryonics) have both benefited from Silicon Valley philanthropy. Tensions imbue the XF movement as well: some xenofeminist currents emphasise the emancipatory potential in alienation, whereas others highlight the importance of building coalitions and “being *in* and *of* [a] world” marked by crisis.⁵ And, although XF brands itself as a gender abolitionist movement, its origins lie in accelerationist thinking. Notwithstanding these ideological entanglements and contestations, the overarching principles of xenofeminism and transhumanism embrace faith in technoscientific rationalism. Both movements thus reinforce a cybernetic logic that “reconfigure[s] the body as an informational system.”⁶ As historical examinations of science and technology reveal, this body-as-data rhetoric is entwined with capitalism.⁷

This essay begins with a deeper exploration of the ideological overlaps between transhumanism and xenofeminism. I take the work of Helen Hester, a founding member of Laboria Cuboniks and lead thinker on xenofeminism, as an entry point into challenging the presuppositions that threaten the project’s more radical manoeuvres. Following this critique, I survey the potential for a dealienating means of production in ecofeminist political economy and degrowth movements. I then develop what I call a vital-fatal politics through an examination of life/death and human/nonhuman entanglements in gestation. My investment in finitude engages what Rosi Braidotti refers to as a posthuman theory of death, one that resists the twinned dreams of capital accumulation and immortality. Transhumanism continues to propagate visions of eternal life made possible by advanced computation despite ongoing global climate and health crises. I argue that the emphasis on alienation and technological manipulation in XF risks the reappropriation of transhuman values. My formulation of a vital-fatal framework advances an uncomfortable biopolitical reframing: a feminist politics for the Anthropocene should seek not only an equal right to live but also an equal predisposition to die. Taken together, my emphasis on feminism, ecology, and finitude intends to resituate the fragility of the body as fundamental to responsible world-building.

We Have Never Been Natural

5 Patricia Reed, “What is Care at Planetary Dimensions?” (Lecture, Floating University, Berlin, August 6, 2019). https://laboriacuboniks.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Reed-What_is_Care_Lecture-2019.pdf.

6 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 85. <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/2027/heb05711.0001.001>. EPUB.s

7 See Michelle Murphy, *The Economization of Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017) and Jacqueline Wernimont, *Numbered Lives: Life and Death in Quantum Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018).

To begin with some words of clarification, there is much to be redeemed from xenofeminism, particularly in Hester's account. First, any movement that troubles the naturalisation of gender follows the feminist tradition of dismantling supposedly "given" systems and structures, although it seems that the XF manifesto is at odds with itself in this respect when it ardently declares that "xenofeminism is a rationalism."⁸ Notwithstanding this tension, I find Hester's criticism of ecofeminism convincing; a feminist politics that romanticises nature should not do so at the expense of bodily sovereignty. Equally compelling is Hester's expansion of reproductive justice to include "support for having and raising children in conditions of safety."⁹ And, for her part, Hester does acknowledge the limits of an accelerationist Prometheanism in envisioning radical gender politics.¹⁰

However, where xenofeminism highlights the historical association of nature with oppression—insofar as Western colonialism has sought to master nature at every turn and subsequently construct it through the lens of normativity—my understanding of nature is inextricably tied to the technological. We see the co-shaping of biological and technological forces, particularly in the medical context: hormone therapy mobilises the body's own molecular functioning in a variety of medical uses, including trans health; insulin treatment engages biological processes necessary for sustaining life; Botox mimics the microbe that causes botulism, but more efficiently. A feminist politics should, then, acknowledge the imbrication of the biological and the technological in political transformation. In other words, it should account for an understanding of nature as an episteme in its own right. This point has been elaborated by ecofeminism, which has centred on an ecological approach to knowledge production. I will explore contemporary ecofeminist and ecosocialist debates more deeply in the following section.

My critique of anti-naturalism, which is again sympathetic to the ecofeminist orientation, locates a eugenic thread in the will to master the body. Historically, the political project of relegating the body to the order of the technological has limited the procreative freedom for persons who have been categorised as less desirable. Feminist philosophers of science and medical anthropologists have illuminated the structural inequalities embedded in the regulation of life, particularly as they manifest in reproductive technologies. Michelle Murphy reveals how the technoscientific approach to reproduction beginning in the post-war period advanced "the genocidal project of eugenics."¹¹ Treatments like egg freezing, IVF, and surrogacy—while they may upend historically determined dimensions of reproductive labour—are

8 Laboria Cuboniks, "Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation," accessed December 17, 2022, <https://laboriacuboniks.net/manifesto/xenofeminism-a-politics-for-alienation/>.

9 Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 126.

10 Helen Hester, "Promethean Labors and Domestic Realism," *e-flux*, September 2017, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/artificial-labor/140680/promethean-labors-and-domestic-realism/>.

11 Michelle Murphy, *The Economization of Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 32.

not widely available. In fact, limited access to such reproductive technologies tends to reinforce racial capitalism. White, wealthy women can afford the high price of having children later in life with assisted reproduction. Meanwhile, Black mothers of all ages are “twice as likely to receive late or no prenatal care” whatsoever.¹² Sophia Roosth argues that commercial sperm banks “advance genetic essentialism,” thus reinforcing a biopolitical model that privileges the white, cis-heteronormative phenotype.¹³ We continue to see the eugenic regulation of life at the hands of the state in the practice of forced sterilisation on incarcerated and Indigenous women.

Returning to the problem of rationalism, to determine that nature is unjust, and to subsequently call for its manipulation—something that both xenofeminism and transhumanism enthusiastically support—is a decidedly anthropocentric gesture to the extent that it once again affirms certain “truths” associated with human nature.¹⁴ I am thinking here of liberty as a right endowed exclusively to the human and only to some humans at that. A major pillar in the XF manifesto is the construction of freedom through *more* alienation. But, as any historical materialist would remind us, alienation has always benefited the aims of capital by reducing the human subject to an instrument of labour. Silvia Federici identifies in the capitalist work-relation the emergence of “the conflict between Reason and the Passions of the Body,” which is to say, a contention between what is socially coded as “masculine” and what is coded as “feminine.”¹⁵ The privileging of the mind has valorised the individual male genius, in turn subjugating the supposedly passive (nonhuman, feminine) body. This sentiment is inscribed in political world-making, specifically in the construction of liberal humanism. Szymon Wróbel observes that even advocates of supposedly “Left” politics have “submitted to the temptations of individualism, consumerism, competition, privilege, and proceeded as if there were no alternatives to state that rule in the interests of markets.”¹⁶ For these reasons, I am not convinced that the XF reinterpretation of alienation can be extracted from its corollaries: privatisation, estrangement, accumulation, and whiteness. Perhaps it is for this reason that Hester abandons the tenet of alienation in her book.

12 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, “Infant Mortality and African Americans,” last modified July 8, 2021, <https://www.minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=23>.

13 Sophia Roosth, “The Right Stuff,” *Triple Canopy*, no. 28, October 27, 2022, https://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the-right-stuff?tcapi:all_people=tc:person_sophia-roosth&ui.definition=tc:person_sophia-roosth.

14 It is worth noting that philosopher Catia Faria, by all accounts convinced by the XF argument, identifies a species bias in the movement’s deficient description of what constitutes the “alien.” See Catia Faria, “Xenozoopolis: Unnatural Solidarity,” *Medium*, January 3, 2021, <https://catiafaria.medium.com/xenozoopolis-unnatural-solidarity-4ea29b061247>.

15 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2014), 134.

16 Szymon Wróbel, “Biocommunity and its Role in Overcoming Biopolitics,” *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 211 (2020), 302.

Scholars across disciplines have called attention to this troubling discursive entanglement. Rosi Braidotti illuminates how anti-humanism, a framework upon which both transhumanism and xenofeminism heavily rely, “often end[s] up espousing humanist ideals,” freedom in particular.¹⁷ Abou Farman argues that the fantasy of transhuman immortality reinforces “old, white, American ideals and rhetorics of pioneering, frontierism” and “limitless expansion.”¹⁸ Similarly, Achille Mbembe identifies in the tradition of Western metaphysics the tendency to ground relations between humans and objects through the discourse of freedom.¹⁹ According to Mbembe, “[t]his tradition assumes that there is a division between the technical world of humans and the natural world of nonhuman animals.”²⁰ This is indeed a position Marx unsettles when discussing the interconnections between Nature and labourers as they manifest in the means of production; everything (human and nonhuman, living and non-living) becomes a source of extraction in the service of capital. In her examination of labour as a condition of life, Hannah Arendt writes, “[b]ecause men were dominated by the necessities of life, they could win their freedom only through the domination of those whom they subjected to necessity by force.”²¹ The condition of one’s freedom, then, hinges on the domination of another’s. This paradigm is particularly apparent in the discourse of reproductive freedom. As Dorothy Roberts reveals, such thinking is framed almost exclusively as “the protection of an individual [white, middle-class, European or American] woman’s choice to end her pregnancy.”²² These positions reveal that the discourse of freedom is inherently imbued with white bourgeois privilege. Not only have we never been natural, but most of the world has never been free.

The aims of xenofeminism may stop short of achieving eternal life, but an emphasis on alienation (from nature, and by extension, from the body) reaffirms liberal humanist values embedded in technoscience. The movement’s accelerationist lineage further problematises the emancipatory interpretation of alienation; as a theory invested in legitimizing white supremacy, it is difficult to “strip accelerationism for parts.”²³ Sophie Lewis remarks that in an age of increasing xenophobia, the xeno- prefix should give us pause: whose bodies are served by *more* alienation? If the teleology of transhumanism and XF

17 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2013), 29.

18 Abou Farman, *On Not Dying: Secular Immortality in the Age of Technoscience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 121, 150.

19 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 94.

20 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 94.

21 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 84.

22 Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 6.

23 Sophie Lewis, “Cyborg Sentiments,” *Red Pepper*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/cyborg-sentiments/>.

is at best limited to abstraction and, at worst, based on individual freedom, even the most progressive agenda will fail to scale to planetary survival. Gender abolitionism must be accompanied by collective practices of care attuned to the precarious planetary condition.

The following section revisits Marx's concept of the means of production to sketch the contemporary ecofeminist developments invested in degrowth and dealienation. As a political strategy, ecofeminist political economy argues for "the much-needed decrease in social metabolism."²⁴ How might we reimagine ecofeminism in ways that avoid the glorification of nature and, at the same time, steer xenofeminism in a direction that attends to the ecological crisis? What possibilities emerge from a framework of slowness rather than techno-fetishism and alienation? I suggest a move toward a feminist biocommunitism to take charge of this era of planetary precarity.

Dealienating the Means of (Re)production

Marxist theory has long held the belief that capital functions through a regime of acceleration and growth.²⁵ Brian Massumi interprets the "future-looking" condition of capital as a *time-function* that revolves around potential.²⁶ Potential is intrinsic to the concept of exploitation insofar as capital operates by gambling on the successful extraction of human labour power. Under the conditions of capital, the human being is a source of potential, and one that must always be maximised to create a continuous, accelerating circuit of social metabolism. Capital's insatiable appetite for growth hinges on living labour, which is to say, labour that is predisposed to mortality. It can then be said that an economy of speculation underlines the accumulation process.

Capitalism is entwined with the rhetoric of potential; Marx's metaphorical use of the vampire and werewolf animate the eldritch desire for perpetuity.²⁷ The politics of potential, as they manifest as insatiability and endlessness, legitimise the techno-utopian fantasy of immortality. We see the

24 Stefania Barca, "The Labor(s) of Degrowth," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 30, no. 2 (2019): 207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1373300>.

25 See Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex* (Pluto Press, 2015); Alexander Galloway, "Brometheanism," *Culture and Communication* (blog), June 16, 2017, <http://culture-andcommunication.org/galloway/brometheanism>; Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986).

26 Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 17, original emphasis.

27 There are a few instances in Volume I of *Capital* in which these terms are invoked. See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (1867), trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow, 1906), 163.

secularised techniques of endless accumulation in the transhuman investment in post-biological existence. The prospect of eternal life by way of brain-computer interfacing has been propagated by the Effective Altruism movement and its emphasis on longtermist ideology. According to Émile P. Torres, as a worldview longtermism:

asserts that there could be so many digital people living in vast computer simulations millions or billions of years in the future that one of our most important moral obligations today is to take actions that ensure as many of these digital people come into existence as possible.²⁸

Longtermists claim to be focused on “safeguarding and improving humanity’s long-term prospects,”²⁹ but Torres notes that their position is fuelled by self-interested libertarianism and eugenics. Although longtermism has faced recent controversy because of its associations with FTX, a now-defunct cryptocurrency empire, its advocates have always been polemical, if not extremist. Prominent longtermist Nick Beckstead, a researcher at the Future of Humanity Institute, believes that “[s]aving lives in poor countries may have significantly smaller ripple effects than saving and improving lives in rich countries [because] [r]icher countries have substantially more innovation, and their workers are much more economically productive.”³⁰ More troubling is longtermist-transhumanist Nick Bostrom’s position that “we ought to transfer all our resources [to the development of digital minds] and let humanity perish if we are no longer instrumentally useful.”³¹ Potential post-biological life is thus accorded more value than existing biological life—that is, life which is already predisposed to precarity and oppression.

A feminist politics invested in equitable world-making must aim to circumvent the patriarchal, colonial legacy of technoscience. To this end, I suggest a redirection from XF’s call for *more* alienation to *dealienation*. I am motivated by Stefania Barca’s ecofeminist political economy framework predicated on a paradigm of degrowth. She describes dealienation as “the process by which Marx’s four forms of estrangement—from the products of labor and the natural world, from the labor process, from

28 Émile P. Torres, “Understanding ‘longtermism’: Why this suddenly influential philosophy is so toxic,” *Salon*, August 20, 2022, <https://www.salon.com/2022/08/20/understanding-longtermism-why-this-suddenly-influential-philosophy-is-so/>.

29 Fin Moorhouse, “Longtermism: An Introduction,” *Effective Altruism*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/articles/longtermism>.

30 Nicholas Beckstead, “On the Overwhelming Importance of Shaping the Far Future” (doctoral thesis, Rutgers University, 2013), 11.

31 Carl Shulman and Nick Bostrom, “Sharing the World with Digital Minds”, chapter in Clarke, Steven et al. (eds), *Rethinking Moral Status* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 318. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192894076.003.0018>.

species-being and from other humans—are actively reversed through collective action.”³² Unlike xenofeminism, an ecofeminist engagement with degrowth is particularly attuned to the struggles of working-class people in the shaping of ecological class consciousness. Barca locates labour as a site of and for democratic decision-making. Specifically, she argues that a political strategy based on degrowth and dealienation decreases the space between workers and the products of their labour. As Barca’s investigation documents, degrowth initiatives concretise the relationship between feminism and ecological justice. The combined framework identifies “the gendered division of labor” as a primary cause of ecological crisis and for this reason, situates “reproduction as a crucial terrain for anti-capitalist struggle and ecological revolution.”³³ We can trace the origins of this orientation from the shift from pagan society to capitalism. Federici reveals how land privatisation in the 17th century coincided with the feminisation of labour, leaving many women with few options to work for a wage (prostitution being a common one). Land expropriation created a power relationship in which employers could cut workers’ pay and lengthen the working day, all while prices for foodstuffs were increasing.³⁴ Women, who paid the highest price under this new regime, participated in anti-enclosure riots, facing imprisonment and further marginalisation as a result. Today, women-led movements like the Global Women’s Strike continue to underscore the connection between work and environmental sustainability at great personal risk.

As Barca’s and Federici’s examinations demonstrate, women have long been engaged in social protest. Crucially, their discursive emphasis on social reproduction illustrates how the value of nature, in every manifestation, is measured in terms of extractability. The body is the primary link between nature and the production process; the body is a conduit for capital. For Barca, exposing the hard, nonfungible line of the human body renders the forces of reproduction visible. These forces are the “(racialized, feminized, dispossessed) subjects who reproduce humanity by taking care of the physical environment that makes life itself possible.”³⁵ From Barca’s account, we learn of the brutal murders of Brazilian forest defenders Zé Claudio Ribeiro da Silva and Maria do Espirito Santo. Barca’s narrative proximity to these human subjects, and the natural resources they sometimes die defending, reminds us of “the fragility of the material world.”³⁶ Despite the interdependency between the relations of production, “capitalism . . . diminishes or annihilates the life-enhancing potentialities of the forces of reproduction.”³⁷ Economic growth is contingent on a condition of chronic precarity, but precarity eventually gives way to collapse. As the past two decades have viscerally verified, bubbles always burst. If alienation is a “distinguishing

32 Barca, “The Labor(s) of Degrowth,” 209.

33 Barca, “The Labor(s) of Degrowth,” 214.

34 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 72.

35 Stefania Barca, *Forces of Reproduction: Notes for a Counter-Hegemonic Anthropocene* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.

36 Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 49.

37 Barca, *Forces of Reproduction*, 6.

trait of the capitalist work-relation”, then dealienation and degrowth offer a counter manoeuvre.³⁸ A dealienation of re/production recognises that the forces of production are finite. Bodies, in their present incarnation, eventually die; machines wear out from abiotic stress; natural resources are depleted. All matter—mortal or machinic—is subject to the irreversibility of time.

To imagine a degrowth model along the lines suggested by ecofeminist socialism, I draw on Nick Dyer-Witthford’s “prospectus for biocommunitism, a communism emerging from the catastrophes capital now inflicts throughout the *bios*, the realm of life itself.”³⁹ Dyer-Witthford’s formulation envisions six elements essential to biocommunitist organisation: “new disaster relief systems; opening borders to migrants fleeing calamity; expropriation of capital from crisis-critical industries; rationing of consumption; mobilization of emergency labour; and ecological and economic planning.”⁴⁰ As Dyer-Witthford reveals, the current construction of emergency infrastructure is “shot through with authoritarianism and discrimination” to the extent that vital systems cater to commerce.⁴¹ Both Hurricane Sandy and Covid-19 evidence how low-income populations are further marginalised in times of disaster. As a collectivist mode of social reproduction, biocommunitism emphasises what Nancy Fraser terms a “politics of care” that resists the ways in which capitalism instrumentalizes crisis.⁴² Dyer-Witthford suggests both state-led initiatives and communal mutual aid practices to this end. The discursive emphasis on care continues in biocommunitism’s recognition of the “proletarian nature of global migration.”⁴³ The solution to the refugee crisis is not simply a matter of permitting the “right to move,” but also one that enforces a “right to stay.” The opening of borders must be accompanied by the termination of conditions, like military interventions and ecological malpractice, that motivate migrant flight in the first place.⁴⁴

Dealienation is baked into biocommunitism insofar as it advocates for “new forms of communal ownership [and] the abolition of privatised ownership and production.”⁴⁵ This emphasis on social equalisation also manifests in biocommunitism’s call for rationing as both a limit *and* a promise, as well as in a radical rethinking of labour. In a biocommunitist framing, “essential work” is part and parcel of “a system

38 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 135.

39 Nick Dyer-Witthford, “Biocommie: Power and Catastrophe,” *Platforms, Populisms, Pandemics, Riots*, June 6, 2022, <https://projectpppr.org/populisms/biocommie-power-and-catastrophe>.

40 Nick Dyer-Witthford, “Biocommie: Power and Catastrophe.”

41 Nick Dyer-Witthford, “Biocommie: Power and Catastrophe.”

42 Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” *New Left Review*, no. 100, July/August 2016, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii100/articles/nancy-fraser-contradictions-of-capital-and-care>.

43 Dyer-Witthford, “Biocommie,” 2022.

44 Dyer-Witthford, “Biocommie,” 2022.

45 Dyer-Witthford, “Biocommie,” 2022.

whose prime directive [is] the social and ecological well-being of its population.”⁴⁶ In this vision, the elements involved in social reproduction—in Barca’s formulation, the “forces of reproduction”—are essential to the means of production. Within a biocommunist framework, domestic labour is refigured as a collective endeavour toward ecological stability. The final element in biocommunist planning, foregrounds the possibilities in a degrowth model. Specifically, it suggests “a mode of production beyond capital” that would “[trade] off high consumerism for free time, environmental plenitude, social solidarity and species-survival.”⁴⁷

To further propel a politics of care, I suggest injecting an anti-eugenic component into the biocommunist framework. I am particularly inspired by Szymon Wróbel’s orientation to biocommunist as a process of “population empowerment” in which “power over life is transformed into the power of life itself.”⁴⁸ A feminist biocommunist, I argue, engages a biopolitics that resists the eugenic principles in technoscientific reproduction. My addition to Barca’s and Dyer-Witthford’s formulations narrows in on the body’s reproductive capacities. Expanding on the biocommunist elements sketched above, a feminist biocommunist seeks to 1) resist the heteronormativity embedded in reproductive technology, 2) cultivate a framework of reproductive justice that endows an equal right to reproduce on one’s terms, 3) de-commodify reproductive technology like IVF and egg freezing so that it is financially accessible, 4) advance a rationing of resources rather than a Malthusian approach to population control, 5) envision domestic work and social reproduction as essential work, and 6) marshal a biopolitics that underscores the importance of finitude—that is, a model of planning that attends to the fragility of the material world. Together, these feminist inflexions in biocommunist intend to reckon with both ecological and corporeal limits. If, as Abou Farman remarks, “[i]mmortality . . . saves posthuman lives”, then an emphasis on degrowth and decay endeavours to save life as we know it—that is, life that is predisposed to mortality.⁴⁹

To reiterate, there is no degrowth without dealienation.⁵⁰ Inasmuch as any feminist politics strives to engage anti-capitalist practices, it must also strive to “[overcome] the existing state of affairs”, specifically the strategies dedicated to the regulation of life.⁵¹ This is, according to Wróbel, the charge of biocommunist. My engagement with Wróbel’s conception of population empowerment is invested in resisting the longtermist embrace of Malthusianism and in anti-natalist arguments on the Left

46 Dyer-Witthford, “Biocommie,” 2022.

47 Dyer-Witthford, “Biocommie,” 2022.

48 Wróbel, “Biocommunist and its Role in Overcoming Biopolitics,” *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 211 (2020), 301–321.

49 Farman, *On Not Dying*, 248.

50 Barca, “The Labor(s) of Degrowth,” 207.

51 Wróbel, “Biocommunist and its Role in Overcoming Biopolitics,” 302.

that see no recourse to ecological preservation.⁵² These fatalistic orientations neglect the fact that food security was an issue long before overpopulation emerged as a political ideology. In fact, earlier historical records underscore the problem of low birth rates, compounded by pandemic conditions, particularly as it materialised in the political economy of accumulation and extraction. In the 16th century, Europe began to experience population decline because of “the reluctance of the poor to reproduce themselves.”⁵³ The population crisis coincided with an economic crisis resulting from labour shortages and dwindling trade, for it was not the ruling class that perished at higher rates but rather the day-laborers. According to Federici, this period of demographic and economic plight sets in motion “the first elements of a population policy and a ‘bio-power’ regime,” including disciplinary methods for procreation.⁵⁴

This is all to say that capital, as an always-accelerating deathless phenomenon, cannot help but create conditions under which the population is inherently beset by crisis. A move toward degrowth refigures population empowerment as part of the process of social equalisation. A biocommunist approach to population affirms Marx’s “hatred for Malthusianism” insofar as it affirms the proletariat’s “right to love.”⁵⁵ Although Henri Lefebvre argues “this hatred was not motivated by a moral principle, and even less by any populationist policy,” he admits that Marxist thought is concerned with “the intensification and broadening of life.”⁵⁶ But the broadening of life seems to suggest very much an interest in population ethics, or at least a social metabolism that takes the issue of reproduction into account. To underscore Wróbel’s formulation of a biocommunist as an overcoming of state-enforced biopolitics, a broadening of life—a vision of life that is shared with others—resists the eugenic principles embedded in the management of life. To cultivate “the power of life itself,” feminist politics must enforce both degrowth and dealienation. The preservation of life thus hinges on an economy of finitude.

Towards a Vital-Fatal Politics

52 Arguments for zero population growth, voluntary human extinction, and “childfree by choice” have been largely associated with radical environmentalism. It is reasonable to include antispeciesism and the antisocial turn in queer theory in such thinking, as well. See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016) and Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

53 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 86.

54 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 86.

55 Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1995), 140.

56 Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, 140.

“Mortal” is a curious word. As a noun, it denotes a human being; as an adjective, it describes the condition of said noun as causing death or fatality.⁵⁷ Etymologically speaking, life can only exist in a reciprocal tension with death. According to Donna McCormack, being is always already haunted precisely because it is conditioned by time.⁵⁸ This haunted quality in ontology is especially apparent in organ transplantation, where the dead “other” is incorporated into a living body.⁵⁹ We witness a similar haunting in autoimmune disease, where a once-healthy body fails to cohere with the subjectivity it envelops. Even under optimal conditions, there is something already unfamiliar in the relationship between the body and the self. For example, I cannot discern my internal organs from those of someone whose age and lifestyle are proximal to mine. That we are not necessarily privy to our own bodies makes manifest the complex relationship between biology and subjectivity and between vitality and death.

If the line between life and death is already tenuous, how are we to psychically navigate the terms of living? I find an unlikely ally in Benjamin Bratton, who argues for a *positive biopolitics* that “accepts death as part of life.”⁶⁰ Similarly, Rosi Braidotti suggests “an affirmative posthuman theory of death” to expand an understanding of life as one that is interconnected rather than discrete.⁶¹ In other words, a posthuman theory of death advances ecological, rather than individualistic, thinking and practice. As my analysis of the politics of alienation and potential has intended to demonstrate, to engage in such thinking is to engage in a biopolitical model of degrowth and destruction. Specifically, it is to respond to Mbembe’s question, “[if], ultimately, humanity exists only through being in and of the world, can we found a relation with others based on the reciprocal recognition of our common vulnerability and finitude?”⁶² My wager is that such ethical thinking hinges on the body’s fragility precisely because flesh creates responsibility⁶³; it *binds* us to the Other.⁶⁴ I now turn my attention to the comingling of life and death as it manifests in the mortal gestating body to develop a vital-fatal body politics. I focus

57 Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “mortal,” accessed December 18, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mortal>.

58 Donna McCormack. “The Haunting Temporalities of Transplantation,” *Body & Society* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 2021): 60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X21998729>.

59 McCormack, “The Haunted Temporalities of Transplantation,” 59.

60 Benjamin Bratton, “Agamben WTF, or How Philosophy Failed the Pandemic,” *Verso Blog*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5125-agamben-wtf-or-how-philosophy-failed-the-pandemic>.

61 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 110.

62 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 3.

63 Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 178.

64 McCormack, “The Haunted Temporalities of Transplantation,” 67.

on the body's capacity to gestate to elaborate on gender and sex-specific social and health conditions. My intention is to identify a thread between XF and ecofeminism in thinking of the body-as-technē.

Pregnancy is a violent process; it is unequivocally much more dangerous to the future (or would-be) mother than abortion.⁶⁵ Gestation and delivery involve myriad health risks, including hypertension and diabetes, as well as ectopic pregnancy and excessive bleeding, both of which can be life-threatening. Such risks are disproportionately magnified for low-income mothers and even more so for Black mothers. This insight is not meant to reduce the psychic and physical pain of those gestators who face difficulty when attempting to conceive. However, it is intended to expose the destruction inherent to reproduction, particularly as it develops under the conditions of privatised healthcare.

In addition to the biopolitical violence embedded in pregnancy, the biological (but not necessarily human) process responsible for the creation of life is an inherently violent ordeal. In order to conceive and carry a foetus to term, the gestator's immune system must be defeated by the placenta, a temporary foetal (and, therefore, foreign) organ that begins to develop after implantation. In the process of downregulating the immune system, the placenta's tendrils attach themselves to the uterus to transfer blood between mother and foetus (such an image conjures the cosmic Cthulhu). This process demonstrates the technological capacities inherent to the human body, in turn animating what Braidotti calls the "immanent force of *zoē*, or life in its nonhuman aspects."⁶⁶ Considering that mammals likely evolved from egg-laying to live birth because of an ancient retrovirus, we might begin to think of the placenta as the original prosthesis, or even the original mother.⁶⁷ The nonhuman martyr, as it were, marshals destructive methods for life-giving ends. And yet, the cultural fetishisation of the child as a symbol of (and for) the future conceals the destruction essential to the creation of life. Like transhuman immortality, we see a logic predicated on endless potentiality rather than finitude in the puritanical vision of procreation.

I turn to Sophie Lewis, who builds on the feminist Marxist call for family abolition to disengage from the discursive emphasis on potential as it manifests in reproduction. Lewis examines surrogacy to identify the myriad ways in which the gestational body is alienated from the product(s) of its labour, but gestation in all forms (whether surrogated or not) is oftentimes an alienating experience. As engagements with Foucault's biopolitical framework demonstrate, the clinic is responsible for both

65 I use "mother" in addition to "gestator" to acknowledge the history between women's bodies and the social constructions of reproduction.

66 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 66.

67 Heather Radke and Becca Bressler, "Everybody's Got One," August 20, 2021, *Radiolab*, podcast, <https://radiolab.org/episodes/everybodys-got-one>.

medicalizing pregnancy and pathologizing women's bodies.⁶⁸ For this reason, medicine and public health participate in the social construction of the child-as-future metaphor, often at the expense of maternal wellbeing. Lewis suggests we shift our ideological orientation toward gestation from one that reinforces privatisation to one that takes a decolonial approach. Full surrogacy describes the "[cultivation of] non-oedipal kinship and sharing reciprocal mothering labors between many individuals and generations."⁶⁹ Lewis identifies queer co-parenting, mutual aid, and open adoption as methods for resistance against the commercialised, heteronormative model of familial relationships. I see such methods as manifestations of feminist biocommunity, particularly in the way they radically re-envision parenting models and domestic labour.

In addition to illuminating the systemic injustice embedded in commercial gestation, I am interested in exposing the ways contraceptive technologies have reinforced a politics of potential to serve the interest of the market. Different forms of birth control have been widely deployed as methods for population control while espousing a discourse of freedom. Inasmuch as birth control affords women reproductive agency, it also reinforces a biopolitical model that endeavours to spare the state from unplanned (i.e., undesirable) pregnancies. In other words, contraceptive technologies have aided the biopolitical project that prevents some lives from being born "so that future others might live more prosperously."⁷⁰ Michelle Murphy pointedly remarks that "birth control, in its military function, work[ed] to stem the tide of Communism."⁷¹ Once again, an emphasis on individualism and agency in technoscience serves the aims of capital.

Returning to Lewis, whose argument is structured primarily around abolition rather than destruction, I find her somewhat throwaway remark that considers the world-destroying potential in gestation particularly motivating.⁷² What politics and world-making arise from dreams of destruction? Can a greater focus on death and degrowth create more equitable living conditions for humans and nonhumans? Such questions begin to carve paths for what Bratton calls *positive biopolitics* that resists the trap of techno-utopianism (a major flaw in much of Bratton's thinking). To this end, I suggest a reconfiguration of procreation as not only a human right but inextricably tied to death insofar as it is conditioned by the mortal body. Although procreation has historically sustained labour power (in turn, sustaining capital), the combination of social reproduction and class struggle has advanced social infrastructure

68 See Adele Clarke, *Disciplining Reproduction: Modernity, American Life Sciences, and "the Problems of Sex"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

69 Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now*, 314.

70 Michelle Murphy, *The Economization of Life*, 114.

71 Murphy, *The Economization of Life*, 35.

72 Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (London, UK: Verso, 2019), 167.

like healthcare and welfare programs.⁷³ In this way, social reproduction sustains life itself through the politics of care. Gestation is, therefore, always concerned with the means of reproduction. We come into the world because *somebody* goes into labour.

The Left's embrace of anti-natalism as both a moral and ecological imperative, aside from its turn toward a self-imposed eugenic fatalism (as opposed to a vital-fatalism), neglects both the gestating body's world-destroying capabilities and the role that gestation plays in health. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Toni Morrison exposes the discontinuity between the body's reproductive phases and the socially accepted age at which people ought to reproduce.⁷⁴ Morrison laments that the body's reproductive capacity is tethered to the economy: the body's "nature"—that is, its *technē*—can only be realised if a person's income can afford to procreate. The social imagination around reproduction, as Morrison underscores, is driven by ruling-class interests. Morrison's vision, in which she describes the possibility for young mothers to also lead fulfilling professional lives, animates the destructive potential in gestation. To dissociate the body, and the process of reproduction, from the market, is both life-affirming and world-destroying. To reinterpret an XF refrain, let the proletariat—in all its gender configurations—bloom!

My argument for a vital-fatal body politics also recognises that gestation and birth play parts in reproductive health. For women who suffer from autoimmune disease, pregnancy has been shown to alleviate symptoms by downregulating the immune system. New research reveals that nulliparity, the medical term to describe a woman who has never given birth, increases women's risk of developing uterine fibroids and certain cancers.⁷⁵ To be sure, and as I mentioned earlier in this section, the process of bringing life into this world is not without risk. But it is a risk that underlines our feeling of responsibility to others and the world.⁷⁶ An equal emphasis on vitality and finitude reinforces the temporal, collective condition of life. Inasmuch as reproduction grounds humanity's "right to stay," it also sets the finite terms of life. For this reason, life-affirming principles and practices must strive to secure both an equal right to live and an equal predisposition to die.

As the entanglement of life and destruction in pregnancy demonstrate, the body is always already

73 Elise Thorburn, "Human-Machinic Assemblages: Technologies, Bodies, and the Recuperation of Social Reproduction in the Crisis Era" (doctoral thesis, University of Western Ontario, 2015), 10.

74 Bonnie Angelo and Toni Morrison, "Toni Morrison: The Pain of Being Black," *Time*, May 22, 1989, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,957724-4,00.html>.

75 See Caroline Bologna, "What are Uterine Fibroids? Symptoms and Risk Factors You Should Know," *Huffington Post*, May 13, 2022, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/uterine-fibroids-symptoms-risk-factors_1_627aa5e7e4b00fbab634b988; Jessica Jondle, "What Are the Health Risks for Nulliparous Women?," *Healthline*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.healthline.com/health/pregnancy/nulliparous>.

76 For an extensive discussion on the relationship between finitude and responsibility, see Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019).

technological to the extent that it is natural (which is to say that it is socially constructed). The body's natural, technological capacity, however, suggests new ways of thinking about nature beyond human construction and entrapment. For this reason, we might begin to reconsider nature as a force of *zoē* and as such, also a means for destabilising presuppositions associated with the "human." Against the metanarrative suggested by discourse that separates nature from culture, Braidotti urges us to engage with "a materialist, vitalist, embodied and embedded" theory of posthumanism.⁷⁷ This iteration of posthumanism "avoid[s] the contempt for the flesh and the trans-humanist fantasy of escape from the finite materiality of the enfleshed self."⁷⁸ Along this line of thinking, a vital-fatal body politics understands nature as an instrument for population empowerment. It finds the largely automatic and somewhat nonhuman processes in gestation both destructive and life-affirming.

Conclusion

Part of the work of what has been historically described as "intellectual labour" is reinterpreting and stewarding ageing ideas so that they continue to generate meaning. Some ideas age better than others; as I have demonstrated, critics of transhumanism have revealed its political baggage, particularly its eugenic lineage and apparent trajectory. I realise that my application of feminist politics aligns with earlier waves of feminist scholarship that emphasise embodiment as much as it does with thinkers associated with xenofeminism—or perhaps it is more accurate to say that I find xenofeminism and earlier feminisms equally problematic. As much as I am moved by Arendt's framing of natality "as a miracle that saves the world," I realise that this sentiment could be wielded by political reactionaries who value women only for their reproductive power.⁷⁹ Moreover, Arendt, like many Western philosophers, places stock in a dialectics of freedom through action (made manifest "by virtue of being born") without much attention to the social construction of gender and the way it manifests in labour practices and politics in general.⁸⁰ In the same spirit of critique, we would do well to remember that anti-naturalism has also leveraged political decisions permitting the widespread use of forever chemicals insofar as gambles on the body's adaptability for the purpose of prolonged extraction. And while I see emancipatory potential in gender hacktivism, my fidelity lies with corporeality—not the corporatisation of life materials. Historically, imperial, colonial, and patriarchal powers reap the rewards of biological manipulation. For this reason, we ought to seek and demand grounds for mutual responsibility rather than claiming territories of freedom.

77 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 50.

78 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 90.

79 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247.

80 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247.

I am tempted to further distance myself from the conservative pro-life agenda, but I hope my devout allegiance to the Communist cause has proven that my argument is not sympathetic to puritanical thinking. Rather, I have endeavoured to articulate a natalism against the eugenic pro-life ideology that continues to imbue political and moral structures. My understanding of life as intimately tied to death has intended to combat the neoliberal emphasis on potential and alienation embedded in technoscience. In other words, it has sought to underscore “the expressive intensity of a Life we share with multiple others, here and now.”⁸¹ My lot is cast with those who share a sense of responsibility to the material world.

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81 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 190.

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