

**Reproduction and Speculative Futures conference
Lancaster University
Event report**

The Reproduction and Speculative Futures conference was held in October 2024. It was organised by Dr Anna McFarlane in collaboration with the Future of Human Reproduction Project and it invited scholars to think through the relationship between speculation and the themes of procreation, pregnancy and birth. Across two days, attendees approached this suppressed but ever-present feature of speculative fiction and culture, exploring the intersections between, for example, reproduction and environmental crises, technology and law, as well as the attendant queer, feminist and anti-colonial politics that arise from discussions of social and biological reproduction. This event report focusses on the papers presented at the first day of the conference which was held, in-person, at Lancaster University.

After some words of welcome and introduction by Anna McFarlane, the day began with Heather Latimer's keynote paper, 'Future Now: Reproduction and our Dystopic Imagination'. This interwove concerns about reproductive futures, the climate crisis and colonialism. Latimer opened by asking why the language of dystopia has become the main form of discourse around reproductive policies and rights, and considered what, if anything, this genre offers in discussions of reproductive futures. After providing a general background of reproductive dystopic fiction, she turned to Louise Erdrich's novel *Future Home of the Living God* (2017). Borrowing from Sherryl Vint, Latimer used this novel to illustrate ways in which dystopic fiction can provide not solely a diagnosis, but also a map towards an alternate future of reproductive freedoms. Through her reading of the novel, Latimer emphasised the importance of community and kinship, and explained how imagined reproductive dystopias often draw from real-world colonial histories. From this discussion, she explained how systems of reproductive control are enmeshed with the climate crisis, religious fanaticism, and the prison industrial complex. *Future Home of the Living God* explores a world where reproduction has failed due to climate catastrophe and only indigenous women are capable of carrying a child to term; this turns the 'threat' of indigenous and black motherhood into a commodity to be exploited. In the novel, White society attempts to reproduce the settler state through abuse of indigenous bodies, showing, as Latimer argued, that control of family and reproduction is not a symptom of colonial power, but its source. This led to the talk's primary claim, that the future of survival lies not in the state, but in community. Forms of social organisation both in the novel and in real life prove that different modes of living are not only possible, but essential to survival. Latimer concluded by claiming that the indigenous connection to land, kin, and community are able to provide a path out of the violence of settler state colonialism.

In the first session, the subject of cloning connected papers in the panel, 'Speculative Biologies.' Firstly, in "'To Have and to Hold, to Kiss and to Cut": The Nuclear Family and Reproductive Violence in Lai's *The Tiger Flu*,' Heather McCardell argued that the absence of heteronormative reproductive practices novel does not, in itself, liberate culture from the reproductive violence inherent to heteronormative relationships. The paper showed how, in the novel, the potential for life implicit in reproductive capability through the asexual birthing of clone children is privileged over the preservation of existing life through organ donation for living people. As such, she concluded, reproductive violence is bound to the existing cultural hierarchies created around reproduction. In contrast to this analysis of an intensely

fleshy narrative of cloning, Elia Cuigni argued in ‘Cloning trauma: the fight for post-traumatic reproduction in *1000xRESIST*’ that cloning functions in *1000xRESIST* (a 2024 video game) as a break in the mother-child relationship which is at once cannibalistically close and unbearably separate. Cuigni aligned reproduction with the idea of a wound or rupture that the ectogenetic cloning in the game attempts to eradicate. The discussion that followed centred on the differing roles of birth in the different clone narratives; McCardell argued that birth-without-men serves a liberating function for clones originally born in service of men in *The Tiger Flu*, while Cuigni identified the absence of birth in *1000xRESIST* as an attempt to subvert and control the perceived harm of parent-child relationships through generational trauma.

In the corresponding panel, ‘Reproductive Technologies,’ presenters discussed representations of future reproductive technologies in speculative fiction as spaces of potentiality, hope, or horror. Firstly, Aline Ferreira explained that speculative fiction has consistently imagined parthenogenetic scenarios in which women are able to reproduce without the contributions of males. Ferreira tracked a history of parthenogenesis in speculative fiction before turning to two recent texts: Sara Flannery Murphy’s *Girl One* (2021) and Clare Chambers’ *Small Pleasures* (2020). She demonstrated that, while these fictions function on the one hand as thought experiments, they also portray aspects such as community support and nurture that are essential to possible reproductive futures. Following this, Avik Sarkar’s paper ‘Trans-Feminist Politics of Reproductive Justice’ argued that the future of reproductive justice lies in an embrace of the collective. The paper made this claim through discussion of two video works: ‘That Fertile Feeling’ by Vaginal Davis and ‘Pregnancy’ by Micha Cárdenas. Sarkar explored the importance of trans-feminist reproductive narratives as a life-sustaining practice, and argued that, because transwomen of colour are viewed as already dead, with no future, art that represents pregnant transwomen is actually an act of survival. Finally, Jana-Katharina Burnikel turned to HBO’s *Raised by Wolves* (2020) to ask how speculative cultures respond to the question of the climate crisis. In *Raised by Wolves* we see humanity evolving in tandem with machines while reproductive technologies create dread and horror, rather than hope and survival. Collectively, the panel looked at how reproductive technologies operate as spaces for both hope and dread. Across all the papers reproductive technologies emerged as sites on which a unifying call for community, kinship and the collective can be articulated.

The panel ‘Utopia and Dystopia’ in the second session explored the role of reproduction across utopian and dystopian futures. In “21st Century Gynotopia: Reproductive Revenge Fantasy or Invitation to Shared Experience,” Rachel Harrison defined and discussed the concept of the gynotopia, an idealised future society for women. The paper explored how such narratives function at the expense of men, identifying a tendency in such fictions to show the incarceration and rape of males. Harrison argued that these gynotopias such as, for example, Ciminert’s *Femtopia* (2021), are not mere revenge fantasies in which women subvert sexual violence against the primary perpetrators, but rather make universal the horror of sexual and reproductive violence that women routinely experience. Turning from dystopia to utopia, Victoria Browne advocated for the necessity of retaining miscarriage in imaginations of feminist futures. Doing so, she suggested would reduce stigma around miscarriage and contribute to the retention of support for those who experience it. Returning to the subject of dystopia in her paper, Miranda Iossifidis identified ideologies of racialised populationism in recent eco-dystopian texts. focussing on *The Offset* (2021) and *The High House* (2021), Iossifidis argued, that eco-dystopian novels express a form of anti-natalism, by

representing overpopulation as one of the primary causes of eco-catastrophe. Responding to ecological crises thus becomes a question of which lives are valuable, who deserves to live. In the following question and answer session, Iossifidis pointed to a more general pattern of greenwashing in certain far-right movements, allying racialised and nationalist populationist ideas with eco-critical discourses.

In the parallel panel, 'Genre and Experimentation,' speakers discussed parental rights through a focus on fantasy fiction. Charul Palmer-Patel's paper 'It takes a Community: Examining Horror in Epic Fantasy,' looked at how motherhood is represented in 1980's fantasy fiction and argued that the genre offers depictions of anxieties surrounding childbirth, inheritance and parental ownership. Illustrated by examples from numerous fantasy novels, Palmer-Patel discussed abortion, eugenics and adoption, asking who has the right to raise a child? The paper claimed that the child in fantasy novels is often presented as a tool, owned by whomever is best able to wield him. These issues continued to be analysed in Dorota Wisniewska's paper 'Curator Ventris: Roles, Functions, and Responsibilities.' This looked at curator *ventris* (a term for a legal representative of a foetus in the womb) in *The Witcher* (2019). *The paper* explained how this concept is explored in fantasy fiction, and showed how it has operated in law throughout history. The paper explained how *curator ventris* was utilised to perform legal or procedural actions for the benefit of the conceived child, but had no right over the life or death of the child, or the choice of the mother. Both papers in the panel explored the fantasy genre as a site of speculation.

In the first session of the afternoon, panellists on 'Reproduction and Speculative Cultures on Screen' Approached speculation and reproduction in cinema. In her paper 'Fertile Feminist Futures?: Artificial gestation, forced insemination, and women directors of SF,' Amy C. Chambers compared two very different portrayals of reproductive technology in science fiction films directed by women: firstly Claire Denis' 2018 film *High Life* which also uses the aesthetics of horror cinema, and the other, a 2023 romantic comedy *The Pod Generation*. Chambers' argued that both films emphasises the medicalisation of the body in which it is viewed as parts for dissection or as a research object. In 'Motherhood and Existentialism: Exploring Freedom and Identity in *I Am Mother*', Ewa Wisniewska turned to Sarte and de Beauvoir to consider the way in which motherhood as a state of being develops. Wisniewska argued that the expectation of motherhood is a barrier to freedom and that the state of motherhood must be chosen freely in order to be meaningful. Wisniewska's analysis of the AI mother in *I Am Mother* (2019) exposed the collapse of motherhood in the absence of choice. Nan Song took a completely different approach to reproduction, focusing on reproduction as metaphor in her paper "Monstrous Reproduction and 'Post-Waste' Eco-anxiety/activism in *Garbage Man* (2009)." Song used the image of image of the birth of the all-consuming monster of waste in D'Lacey's text to challenge traditional theorisations of waste, which prioritise human anthropocentric models of control. Song argued that waste, typically either approached with models of containment or separation, when given life instead becomes part of the ecosystem. Waste, Song claimed, is something to be worked with as a thing-in-itself, and not controlled as a byproduct of human activity, lest it births the allegorical monster that is represented in the text which has the potential to consume us all.

Panellists on 'Reproductive Rights and the Law' discussed reproductive laws of the past and present, while also imagining potential reproductive laws of the future. Deirdre Duffy in 'Collective, loving, fully-feminist, on trails and in backstreets: Rethinking representations of abortion in restrictive legal futures,' theorised a future of abortion practice outside of the liberal feminist paradigm. She argued that, prior to liberalisation, illegal or extra-legal

abortion was a community endeavour practiced not without safety but without government intervention. Through liberalisation, new roadblocks to safe abortion were created, emphasising regional inequality and colonialism within the clinic. Duffy asked why representations of extra-legal abortion practices become solely negative, and highlighted the 'loving and fully feminist' aspects of abortion in these circumstances. Louis Breitsohl's paper 'What Have You Done to Solange (and the Rest of the Girls)? Sexual Emancipation, Reproductive Rights and the Ambivalence of the Father's Law' claimed that struggles for reproductive rights become intensified in times of upheaval and analysed the ways in which this is represented within Massimo Dallamato's *What have you done to Solange?* (1972). They analysed how the serial killer becomes a punitive judge, criminalising female sexuality; autonomy within this text is only possible for the girls of *What have you done to Solange* in the context of a double life. For them, their autonomy and expression is punished by death. In her paper, 'Reproductive Choice in German New Guinea, German East Africa, and Germany,' Anna Orinsky explained how the practices and ideologies of colonialism shaped reproductive freedoms in German colonies during the interwar period. She argued that restrictive laws around reproduction emerged partly as a reaction to the advances in women's rights and freedoms, demonstrating that reproductive laws were tied inextricably with the German colonial fantasy. Together, presenters explored how potential reproductive laws and legal spaces are bound in futurity with the legal context of the past and present.

In the final session of the day, members of the Future of Human Reproduction project participated in a roundtable discussion that focused on the role that speculation played in their disciplines. Andrew Darby, a researcher in Design, pointed to the role that speculation plays in envisioning innovative methods and materials, opening design possibilities. Nicola Williams, a lecturer in Philosophy, referred to Bertrand Russell in arguing that speculation is the very nature of philosophy. She also used the example of the thought experiment, such as the trolley problem, as a speculative tool that is used frequently in Philosophy. Georgia Walton argued that English Literature as a discipline is methodologically opposed to speculation because it is rooted in the practice of close reading and the definition of literary tradition. However, she also argued that there is a speculative capacity in the act of close reading. Discussing the role of speculation in Law research, Laura O'Donovan discussed a more practical example, explaining that speculative practices transform probable futures into practical legal-ethical notions. Kirsty Dunn also offered a specific example of speculation in developmental psychology in the implementation of speculative thought to foetal sensitivity around which our current knowledge is very limited. The panellists also identified some potential risks of speculation. Notably, O'Donovan pointed to the risk of speculation for public perception of novel technologies when it misrepresents scientific development. This is evident in, for example an AI video called 'EctoLife' shared on YouTube that shows an imagined industrialised site for ectogenesis. Many viewers interpreted this facility as real and had a negative reaction to the concept of ectogenesis. Stephen Wilkinson noted that speculation can be biased by the researcher and that there is a risk of over-instrumentalising the imagination. The final point of discussion was the role of interdisciplinarity in the members individual work and within the project. Williams pointed to the contribution of speculative artefacts produced by designers like Darby as a valuable tool in philosophical investigation and as a way to engage the research outside of an academic audience. Finally, several members noted the role that literary representations of technology had played in expanding the breadth and clarity of their speculations, particularly in their ability to provide more detailed scenarios than thought experiments.

