Enjoy It While It Lasts: From Sterility Apocalypses to Non-Nihilistic Non-Reproduction

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Enjoy It While It Lasts: From Sterility Apocalypses to Non-Nihilistic Non-Reproduction

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In Alfonso Cuarón film adaptation of the PD James novel Children of Men (2006), probably the prime example of the Anthropocene-associated genre Rebekah Sheldon calls ‘sterility apocalypse’ (p. 153), the UK government in the year 2027 is ‘hunting Fugees [refugees] like cockroaches’ and mass-distributing suicide kits. Eighteen years have elapsed since the last baby on Earth was born, and that particular human (a global celebrity) has just been murdered. British nationals, free from the cages in which migrants are kept, lay wreaths for the 18-year-old ‘Baby Diego,’ sobbing and keening for the lost future. Yet, as our protagonist Theo remarks meta-textually, ‘it was too late before the infertility thing happened, for fuck’s sake.’ A couple of minutes later, the film again questions whether things already being too late really is the ultimate horror one could face when, in the aftermath of a bomb attack, freedom-fighters slam a hood over Theo’s head: ‘You know that ringing in your ears, that eeeeeeeeeeee? That’s the sound of the ear cells dying, like, their swan song. Once it’s gone you’ll never hear that frequency again! Enjoy it while it lasts!’

This injunction to value existence despite there being no possibility anymore of real repair—to live with dying—is a message delivered as though it were sadism. But is it? Since, in the movie, it comes from Julian (the love of Theo’s life) we might also see it as a nugget of comradely wisdom; a psychological ingredient we need in order to be militants (as Julian is) against ‘the slow cancellation of the future’ (Fisher, 2014).

Horror at the idea of enjoying things, simply, while they last, has cemented itself firmly in late capitalism. This is, on the surface, is counter-intuitive: is it not capitalism that militates against a more sustained, responsible relation to time? Yes, but as Sheldon knows, such a responsibility to the future is actually predicated on an ability to ‘let go and love other worlds’ (Goldstein, 2018, p. 160). The neurotic inability to do just that was famously dubbed ‘reproductive
futurism’ by Lee Edelman in *No Future* (2004), a book that describes all contemporary politics as taking place under the aegis of the ‘baby’s face’ (p. 75). Edelman was theorising a characteristic contradiction of capitalist society, in that short-term consumerism is joined to the cis-hetero compulsion to avoid the present (by fetishising the Child).

It is the logic of Reproductive Futurism that *Children of Men* dystopically exaggerates. The absence of children is unbearable in Cuarón’s 2027 in part because society requires the cipher of the Child (which admittedly has little to do with actual kids) in order to cope; it prefers the ‘melancholic anticipation of future loss’ (Sheldon, p. 4) to the messy response-ability of situated ‘living and dying together on a damaged earth’ (Haraway, 2016).

Watching *Children of Men* with *The Child to Come* in hand, I kept thinking of the trailblazing reconceptualisation of biopolitics in *Testo Junkie*. Specifically, I thought of the scene in which Paul Preciado detects the thrum of a queer more-than-human child, an indeterminate ripple, in the *eeeeeeeeee* of the electric clippers he uses to shave his genitals during a ritual of witchcraft and mourning. Imbibing gel-testosterone, he describes ‘a sharp, high-pitched sound, the voice of a cyberchild trying to get out of the motor, spitting in the face of the past’ (2015, p. 17). Preciado’s reader also encounters, in contrast to this present-oriented attitude of the narrator, a reproductive-futurist subject who ‘walks around with a minuscule corpse attached to her shoulders’: Preciado’s lover, ‘VD.’ The difference between queer desire and repro-futurism, as we learn, might be this: *she* will kill herself to join this ‘barely-born little one’—but only later, when she’s 40. Preciado, for his part, is ready to suicide in the now. Awash with empathy for this woman’s loss, he imagines dying as an ‘opening’ of his mouth, his veins, his oesophagus, and finally, his cells (p. 261). Nevertheless, both the haunting foetal corpse whose death enabled ‘VD’ to escape motherhood, and the defiant infant whose voice can be heard in the buzzing implement of mourning, confirm a core thesis of Rebekah Sheldon’s: that we are living through ‘a shift in focus from the child in need of salvation to the child who saves’ (p. 6).

In vindicating the art of enjoying life’s swan songs, *Testo Junkie* comes perilously close to the overreaction to the Child™, much criticised in queer theory, that extrapolates that there somehow isn’t anything else worthwhile. Not so *The Child to Come: Life After the Human Catastrophe*. Contrary to the tacitly ‘race-blind’ anti-natal impulses present in some queer theory, Sheldon knows that ‘it is not sufficient to renounce or to denounce the child’ (p. 2, note the lower-case c). As she drives home through her race-sensitive readings of settler-colonialist eco-apocalypse sci-fi and infertility dystopias, it’s not so much *despite* this as *because* of it that we need to understand capitalism’s nihilistic optimism, its impulse toward environmental securitisation and techno-managerialism, as firmly inscribed on both sides of the prevalent (white) child-shaped coin. For, notwithstanding its proclamations to the contrary, it is capitalist politics—not its critics
— that are anti-child. Actually existing kids are our most crucial comrades in dismantling the systems of control and blackmail that weaponize Childhood.

In the opening sections of her book, Sheldon marshals a plethora of planet-encompassing infant faces across various media as illustrations of this thesis about ‘where power operates today’ (p. 21). But Sheldon’s awareness of the danger of repro-criticality sliding into an ‘edgy’ anti-child position is cast-iron. In keeping with José Esteban Muñoz’s queer critique of those queer anti-futurisms—notably Edelman’s—that veer into matrophobia (Muñoz, 2009), throughout The Child to Come Sheldon engages scholars from the Reproductive Justice tradition, such a Dorothy Roberts (1997), and substantially elaborates on Alys Weinbaum’s (2004) work on race and reproduction, leaving no doubt that the question ‘which child?’ is the central one.

Roughly 50 years after the airing of the canonical TV advert for Lyndon Johnson’s presidential campaign, ‘Daisy Girl’ (1964), the COP15 (climate) conference opened to a screening of the Raise Your Voice Campaign’s video blackmail ‘Please Help the Earth’ (2009), which deployed much the same disciplinary sentimentality. The 1964 trailer features an ostensibly female white child in the act of cheerfully dismembering a flower, petal by petal, counting as she goes. Her voice segues into an adult voiceover counting down to zero, at which point a nuclear bomb detonates as though inside the child’s eye. ‘These are the stakes … we must love each other, or we must die,’ Johnson’s voice mysteriously concludes.

In Sheldon’s Introduction, this ad is convincingly compared and contrasted to the floating, planetary ‘Star Child’ of the end of 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968). The juxtaposition serves to show how, on the one hand, through representations of life-in-particular (little Daisy merged with the bomb), and on the other, life-itself (the glowing infant superimposed upon Earth), the child thus ‘does double duty;’ she embodies species survival and begs for protection against contemporary harms, but she also destabilises the human fantasy of reproduction (the desire for ‘physiological self-similarity’ in perpetuity) through her animalistic connection to ‘the interlocking biological and physical systems whose livelinesses compose us as much as we compose with them’ (p. 177). Children in this latter sense (creatures imbued with more-than-human resonances) are strangers utterly unlike us: weird, obscene, demanding and faintly threatening. That’s why they had to be scientifically and culturally re-invented.

Sheldon’s work reads the double mechanism of the Child in everything from environmentalist info-mercials to sugar sculptures by Kara Walker. The result almost eludes summary, so compacted is its layered argumentation, so dense its prose. For my purposes, The Child To Come’s main thrust is this: ‘The issue is not that there is no future but rather that there is no sure way of orienting toward that future, either to save it or to survive it’ (pp. 179–180). The challenge, then, for those of us (like Sheldon, Preciado and Muñoz) who lust for a world of communism, is ‘to get so close to the face of the child that we can see through it
to the sand beneath’ (p. 21); to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016) of that radical uncertainty vis-à-vis the future.

Far from simply being a source of dread, Sheldon suggests, the insight that nature is out of human control might actually be one of our few sources of hope. Non-repetitive futurities for humans can in fact be ‘imagined outside of reproduction and indeed outside of human agency’ (p. 58). In pursuit of this reimagination, Sheldon manages to restore freshness to certain debates some scholars (in STS, the environmental humanities or elsewhere) had all but abandoned in fatigue. For instance: ‘the Anthropocene tells us what has been true [humans manage nature] at the very moment that it ceases to be true’ (p. 179).

As she goes, Sheldon drops gems into topics of less totalising scope, too, for instance: ‘The Handmaid’s Tale is a novel about reproductive technologies’ (p. 123) (no one had quite spelled this out before). Despite reproductive labour and technology being my current field, and despite my familiarity with much of the literature under discussion, Sheldon’s antiwork arguments about gestational labour and nature in Chapter 4 (‘Birth’) felt wholly revelatory. One highlight of the reading experience for me was that chapter’s uncovering of ‘the wolfish premise that all survival comes coupled to harm’ (p. 121) in select oeuvres of Margaret Atwood and Donna Haraway.

For instance, if we take seriously Haraway’s dictum that ‘every technology is a reproductive technology’ (epigraph, p. 115), we must consider how even procreation, paradoxically, has a part to play in the productivity of non-reproduction. The labour of gestation, somewhat like what Sheldon views as the labour of the Earth, is labour that can be refused and withdrawn even though it is not fully human: in these instances, ‘Life says no’ (Sheldon, 2016).

As an experimental thinker of gestational work (Lewis, 2017a), I am struck by the brilliance of this and of Sheldon’s almost throwaway observation that, in surrogacy, ‘the fantasy of heteroreproduction—that 1 + 1 will always = 1—dramatically transforms’ (p. 122). These sturdy refusals of false ‘realism’ and sacrificial pragmatism consistently undergird Sheldon’s monograph. Her comradely (and even Harawavian) criticisms of recent moments of flirtation with such tendencies in Haraway’s evolving project echo, educate and unquestionably surpass the ones I have offered on Haraway’s recent turn to ‘population’ (Lewis, 2017b).

I hope therefore that Sheldon’s next work, provisionally titled Magic as Method, shall earn a wider audience than seems so far to have accrued to The Child to Come. Sheldon frames her characteristically non-conformist inquiry into occultist praxis in terms of ‘the productivity of magic … on the unfolding of the future’ (Sheldon, 2017). Rather than understanding the future as ‘as container for the present’s consequences,’ she announces, ‘I offer a conception of the future as an active plenum rippling with the forces of distortion, iteration, resonance, and distribution.’
It will be interesting to see the extent to which Sheldon makes explicit the continuities between this endeavour and its predecessor. The terms Sheldon has recently employed to clarify the arguments of The Child to Come include ‘queer eco-pessimism’ and ‘queer eco-paganism’ (Sheldon, 2016): referring, as I see it, to the stance of relinquishing the fantasy of control over the future while still remaining political.

In this vein, I wonder if ‘Make kin, and babies maybe!’ might be an apt rephrasing of Haraway’s latest slogan (‘make kin, not babies’) in pursuit of multi-species reproductive justice. In a less ‘magical’ mode, such a sensibility could also be described—borrowing a phrase from Fredric Jameson that attempts to navigate around the pitfalls of a Utopian prescriptivism—as anti-anti-utopianism (Jameson, 2005, p. xvi). Alternatively, to recall a phrase of Nina Power’s, one might say that Sheldon is advancing ‘non-nihilistic non-reproduction’ (Power, 2014). She is asking: how can we magnify the ‘forces of distortion’ rippling through the production of humans?

Countdowns are perhaps one of the most absurdly futile features of human climate change politics (‘time is ticking!’). And it’s not just environmentalism, of course: a grotesque policy proposal for revamping US public education for children of colour through ‘entrepreneurship’ was recently entitled ‘Ten9Eight,’ based on the statistic that a child drops out of school (what could be worse, right?) every nine seconds (Gill Peterson, 2015). A race to salvation: tick, tick, boom!

In the face of such temporal discipline, it has been well-noted that queer survival and flourishing happens ‘sideways’ (Bond Stockton, 2009)—with perhaps a little help from what some STS scholars would call magic. Thus, it occurs to me that, before the voice of mission control takes over (‘Ten, nine, eight . . . ’), ‘Daisy Girl’ is deploying this kind of magic right under our noses in plain sight. She is not counting straight. Indeed, what Daisy actually says is ‘one, two, three, four, five, seven, six, six, eight, nine.’ One assumes and hears linear causality between countdown and detonation. But, reading against the grain of the propaganda—and recalling the role of petal-plucking in the arcane of folk ritual—it could be that Daisy is the witch whose meandering, non-determinate counting-up constitutes the explosive spell.

It is this animal and her plant, I say, rather than warring nation-states, that produce the explosion. What would it take for such a (collective) child to come? Put another way, shouldn’t we ask ourselves: why do our cultures tend to presume an absence of negativity in kids? Do we refuse to imagine that kids will destroy the world as we know it because we need to believe that they—perfectly guided by us—will reproduce it and its nuclear bases ad infinitum? How about relinquishing this illusion of mission control?

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
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