

SPEAKERS

Heather Davis, Sofia Lemos, Sophie Lewis

Sofia Lemos 00:00:03

Hi, good evening folks. My name is Sofia Lemos. I'm the Curator of Public Programs and Research at Nottingham Contemporary, a contemporary art centre in the UK. It is my pleasure welcoming you this evening for a contemporary conversation on extinction, queer ecological imagination, and kin making at the intersection of reproductive and environmental justice struggles. For those of you who are tuning in for the first time Nottingham Contemporary works with artists, with poets, with scholars to reflect on how research and practice intertwine in contemporary art, visual cultures, and in support of different world-making narratives. I'll open this evening with a quote by Canadian philosopher Alexis Shotwell, who writes, and I quote, "We cannot look directly at the past "because we cannot imagine what it would mean "to act responsibly towards it. "We yearn for different futures "because we can't imagine how to get there from here. "The ongoing climate crisis grants us "the insightful outlook on the urgency to rebuild a world "in which many worlds can flourish. "The urgent political, aesthetic, and ethical imperative "this means for our times requires us "to critically appraise our inheritances "as much as our differential access to "and distribution of our futures." So, for the past couple of years, our public programs and exhibitions have intently shared this concern with you, through scholarly partnerships such as carceral ecologies, through contemporary conversations such as this one today, or future is map to the future, with our multi-platform research programs on a continuum. all of which are freely available for you to watch online. In the pursuit of an outline for building a more equitable and a more desirable world unfettered from the structures of racial capitalism, our programs invite curiosity and introduce new ideas and new thinking around how interlocking systems of oppression, including social and environmental vulnerability, can open more complex models for understanding ourselves, our

msdnittoN Contemporary

communities, and our embeddedness with planet earth. This is where we start our conversation today. The proliferation of plastics is now driving evolutionary processes, while rendering increasingly visible our non-reproductive futures associated with growing infertility rates in both human and animal species alike, lower birth rates in large parts of the world, increasingly technocapitalist solutions for assisted reproduction, obviously marked by class divisions, et cetera. Yet at the same time, and in particular during this past year, we've also witnessed the expansion of networks of care, of responsibility, of comradeship, of political friendship. In a world that is increasingly toxic, where slow violence and chemical disruption show us just how much our bodies are inherently entangled with the environment, our speakers this evening invite us to consider a break from the future, from futurity, a survival, as continuity of our social order, while looking out for other more liveable horizons. And just before I'll introduce our speakers this evening, just a short note about what we're going to be talking about. So Heather Davis, who I'll introduce shortly, will share her research into new bacteria being birthed by the rise of plastics and how they may help us shape different models of the world that refused the reproduction of gender sex roles as they are mapped onto ecological discourses, pardon, alongside questions of care for these creatures. Sophie Lewis will share with us her thinking around the duality of care at the heart of environmental practices and reproductive justice. Specifically, Sophie will discuss the many meanings of care in relation to kin making, gestationality, plural mothering, et cetera. So, before I introduce our speakers this evening, as usual, I'd like to share a very brief housekeeping note, which is to say that our public programs of talks, performances, and screenings seek to create challenging environments where respect and open-mindedness for each other's experiences and perspectives can foster growth. We'll keep an informal atmosphere throughout the evening. And you're very welcome to join the conversation. You can use the chat box on YouTube to write your questions and comments, which I will read to our speakers as we move on to discussion. I'll also take this opportunity to show our gratitude to the University of Nottingham and to Nottingham Trent University for generously and graciously supporting our events, as well as acknowledging my colleagues, Catherine Masters and Ryan Kearney, who are supporting us this evening. Now without further ado, I'd like to introduce Heather Davis, who's an Assistant Professor of Culture and Media at the New School in New York. She is co-editor of *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments, and Epistemologies* from 2015. And she's the editor

of *Desire Change: "Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada"*. She's a member of Synthetic Collective, an interdisciplinary team of scientists, humanity scholars, artists, who investigate and make visible plastic pollution in the Great Lakes. Sophie Lewis is a feminist theorist, a cultural critic, and a utopian is based in Philadelphia. She's the author of *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against the Family*, as well as many articles and essays. Sophie is a visiting scholar at the Alice Paul Center for Research on Gender, Sexuality, and Women at the University of Pennsylvania, and teaches online, open to all, at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. Currently she's working on a second book about anti-liberatory trends of feminism in history and in the present. So, without further ado, I'd like to welcome Heather on screen and to thank everyone for being here this evening. Thank you.

Heather Davis 00:06:03

Thank you so much for the invitation, for having me here. Thank you so much, Sofia, for the brilliant questions and prompts that you've given us this evening, as well as to Ryan Kearney and Catherine, who have done an incredible job of technical assistance. And I just also want to say I'm so deeply delighted to be in conversation with Sophie Lewis, whose work I've long admired. So, I also wanted to start by saying that I am coming to you today from Tiohtiá:ke, otherwise known as Montreal, which is situated on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka, a place that has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many First Nations including the Kanien'kehá:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Huron Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg. And that with this territorial acknowledgement it is just the first, a very small step in the ongoing work of beginning to undo the incredible legacies of harm that settler colonialism has brought in this part of the world known as North America, or otherwise known as Turtle Island, and also throughout the world and various manifestations, which I hope will also come through in some of the things that I'm speaking about this evening. So, I'm going to share with you just some images as well, which I'm opening. So, I've been thinking about plastic for about a decade now, understanding it as an intimate manifestation of our engagement with fossil fuels. So, unlike thinking about, unlike thinking about fossil fuel infrastructures, which often seem very removed from our daily realities, aside from maybe, the gas pump or some other kind of more obvious framework, the infrastructure of plastics are real intimate manifestation of the ways in which fossil fuels have shifted and shaped every single way in which we have come to understand and interact with each other, throughout the kind

Contemporary

of course of the 21st, the 20th and 21st century. And I've been thinking about these, this intimate manifestation in a couple of different ways. And so today I'm going to focus on sort of the question of inheritance and plastic in two different types of ways. One where the first where inheritance is a fundamentally distributive act of futures. And thinking about this line with this kind of question of queer kin and questions of care and reproductive justice. So just to kind of give you some context, the image that you are seeing in front of you now is my maternal grandparents, who have both recently passed. And the reason why I'm showing you them is because my grandfather, who you see pictured here, was a chemical engineer and later a manager at the notorious chemical company, DuPont. And the reason when I point to him and to my own personal legacy of my implication with plastics, so one of the things that he was really involved with in, at DuPont was the production of synthetic textiles, which are obviously, I would consider a form of plastic, and they're certainly a polymer derived from fossil fuels. And so, but the other reason why I want to open with this kind of framing is to really point to the ways in which plastic and its infrastructures are one of the ways in which wealth is consolidated and distributed. And so, in my case, this is the kind of inheritance of this plastic legacy, this direct inheritance of plastic legacy, has really benefited my life in so many ways. And so I want to think through this kind of differential sense of inheritance and then also transmission. So I think also inheritance, for me, is a useful framing for thinking about plastic, because as the way that Jacques Derrida would about it, the famous philosopher, he says that "Inheritance is always in the making "as it works through us," but I also use the, and so it's always a kind of future oriented project, which I actually think is a very interesting way to sort of think about the ways in which we are oriented to questions of time, oriented to questions of the kinds of materials and material conditions that we might find ourselves within that we would maybe rather not have, but yet nonetheless have completely structured our terms of existence. But I also use the word inheritance because it is, it refers to how these structures of privilege and power are passed on. And as a term, inheritance is still primarily used both legally and informally to speak of property relations. So inheritance is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as the, quote, "Succession to property title office, "et cetera, a coming into or taking possession of something, "as one's birth right, possession, ownership, "or right of possession." All of these terms that overly emphasize this relationship to material and material conditions as inherently one of a propertied relation. And so inheritance, as this right possession of property,

Nottingham Contemporary

strongly indicates how Western modernity conceives of intergenerational time and the project of continuity, the project of reproduction, not just in a strictly biological sense, but also obviously in the sense of social reproduction. So here we become with the world through our objects, and inheritance as property rather than as skills or as ways of being, assumes a naturalized relation to capital and to colonial extraction, and is about the ways in which filial relations, patriarchy, and race, unfold across generations consolidating rather than redistributing privilege. As the American studies scholar George Lipsitz has written, “This kind of inheritance works “especially through intergenerational transfers “of inherited wealth, to pass on the spoils “of discrimination to succeeding generations.” And this is very much my relationship to plastic. I think this is obvious through these, these family stories and through the kind of transmission of wealth that has occurred because of my grandfather’s position. But I also want to attend to the ways in which this is obviously not the case for many peoples across the planet. And that the term that I’m using to kind of differentiate from inheritance is transmission. So here we can understand the transmission of plastic as the ways in which, as Max Liboiron would say, “Pollution is colonialism.” So the ways in which the imposition of plastic on so many peoples across the world, the lack of choice and being able to pick it up. Not from the position where it benefits oneself, but really from the position that it is an imposition, especially in relationship to its terms of production. We often think of plastic in relationship to what happens after we receive it as consumers, but we rarely consider, or in the kind of media at large, it’s rarely considered the ways in which plastic really enacts the environmental injustices through these, through the acts of production. So I really want to think about that in terms of transmission, which obviously comes, the term obviously comes from media theory to describe this kind of one-way communicational model, which also, I think, again, links to these questions of inheritance, and through the kind of generational transmission of both trauma, but also actual chemical saturation of the body to something that theorists like Michelle Murphy would call latency. So the ways in which one can be exposed, a body can be exposed to certain kinds of chemical transmission, but that the harms of that chemical transmission might not appear until two generations later. So the ways in which transmission is really this one-way model, but its effects or its manifestations are not necessarily linear or progressive or appear immediately. And so this of thinking about transmission is another way of thinking about the terms of social reproduction, just describing this kind of imposition of environmental injustice.

msdnittoN Contemporary

Now thinking about this talk, and thinking about this research that I've been doing for so long, I couldn't help but think about these two quotes from the "Cyborg Manifesto," which I'm sure many of you are extremely familiar with, but I really think that they really speak to many of these questions. So how do we kind of deal with this legacy? This legacy of plastics that has really saturated everything. There is no word. Just in case you don't know, there really is absolutely nowhere on earth that you can go to escape plastics. They're found in the highest mountains, in the Mariana Trench, which is the deepest part of the ocean. And so, and 97% of the people who have been tested have been found with chemicals associated with plastics in their body. So if we're thinking about this kind of totalizing saturation that has become the kind of intimate manifestation of fossil fuels, how do we work through this in a way that doesn't just sort of lead us down to a kind of apocalyptic or a nihilistic path. And one of the ways in which one of the kind of figures that's always haunted my thinking, and like many of us, and is obviously Donna Haraway, in particular, these two quotes, in relationship to maybe thinking about the inheritances or the structures of both reproduction and social reproduction in terms of plastic differently. So she says, "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, "is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism "and patriarchal capitalism, "not to mention state socialism. "But illegitimate offspring are often "exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. "Their fathers, after all, are inessential." And she also says, "Why should our bodies end at the skin, "or at best include other beings encapsulated by skin? And these two quotes are deeply important to me for two different reasons, starting with the last one first. If we think about this in a wider context, as again, Michelle Murphy has suggested, we might want to think about, and other reproductive justice advocates, we might want to think about reproduction, not just in terms of biological reproduction or the continuation of the species, but rather all of the infrastructures that go into the reproduction of particular ways of life. And that includes the kinds of reproductions that we are transmitting onto the planet, maybe inadvertently or by accident. And that brings us back to this first quote, which is really that we can think about plastic and their progeny, their illegitimate progeny, as a kind of cyborg manifestation of this exact same project. So just to turn, for those of you who are maybe a bit unfamiliar, with some of these new life forms. So this is the first type of new life form that I came across in my research. And this is through an article by Erik Zettler, and this is the Plastisphere. So it's a picture of the new microbial communities that exist on floating pieces of plastic out in the ocean. And these are new

Nottingham University

communities of bacteria that now, because of the amount of plastics in the ocean, microplastics now numerically dominate marine debris and are primarily colonized by microbial and other microscopic life. And we're not precisely sure what these new communities do, but it is clear that they are thriving, and in addition to this, there's also multiple forms of fungi that have now developed ways of being able to metabolize plastics, which none of this should be surprising, given the fact that fossil fuels are obviously such a rich concentration of forms of fuel. But this is sort of a home picture of my pet mealworms that I had for awhile who also can (laughing), can effectively digest Styrofoam. They turned it into an alcohol. So wax worms can degrade... In addition to these mealworms, wax worms can also degrade polyethylene as they evolve to live in beehives that eat the wax, which have similar molecular structures, and the fungus *Pestalotiopsis microspora*, found in the Amazon, can biodegrade polyurethane under aerobic and anaerobic conditions. And another fungi can also, have also been identified that can degrade plastics. And another example, particular bacteria, that was found in garbage dumps in Japan has been found to be able to degrade polyurethane terephthalate, which is particularly significant because this is the plastic that we use for water bottles and other forms of plastic packaging. And in 2018 scientists building upon this knowledge accidentally produced bacteria that can speed up the process of consuming PET plastic through the enhancement of the enzyme PETase. The hope is that these enzymes can be harnessed to biodegrade plastic. Though there's also some concern that they could significantly degrade our existing materials and infrastructures if let loose into the wider environment. But the proliferation of plastic is pushing evolution to develop novel ways of dealing with this incredibly rich material. Microbial and human genealogies are becoming further entangled as the consequences of this evolutionary collaboration are unknown. We can, following Myra Hird, think these new bacteria and fungi as indifferent symbiogenetic organisms feeding off of capitalism's excess, proliferating and flourishing in our miasmatic plastic soups, created out of the unregulated advancements of chemical engineering. So I would like to suggest that all of these organisms that are, that have now emerged can be thought of within the terms that Haraway proposed as kind of cyborg organisms. And part of the reason why I propose them as cyborg organisms is not just because they have evolved to deal with all of this kind of plastic mess that has been created by chemical companies and people like my grandfather, but also that I think that there's a way in which we can approach these through a feminist and queer lens that would allow us to, perhaps, even

msdnittoN Contemporary

approach the material of plastic differently. So, as Sofia mentioned in the introduction, there's a lot of anxiety about the ways in which plastic has been interfering in our reproductive capacities. And there's been a lot of anxiety over proper heteronormative reproductivity. And we can see this anxiety reproduced throughout environmental movements, where the figure of the child often stands in for the future, and we can also see this in particular kinds of research, which is actually deeply important to the questions of plastics reproductive toxicity on the body, but also the ways in which plastic is now penetrating all aspects of the body including being found on human placentas, found on and in human placentas after the birth of children. But I want to propose that we might want to think about these cyborgs, these new cyborg bacteria, worms, and fungi as a kind of progeny in order to open up questions of care and responsibility beyond what we have normatively framed in terms of biological reproduction. So if we build on the incredible work of queer folk to really build communities that extend beyond the normative family unit, and also obviously even from thinking about the legacies of all the amazing people who've been doing really interesting work at the kind of, at the intersection of environmental humanities and animal studies and queer theory to thinking about the ways in which a queer framework has often been used to really push against the kind of normative frames and structures of how we think about more than human relations, and in particular, how we think about the category of nature. We can ask the question of what kind of offspring might plastic be. So how might it intersect with questions of queer life and non-reproduction? So how might we embrace some of the non-reproductive capacities of plastics, some of the ways in which it is literally producing queer bodies and non-reproductive capabilities, but how might we approach this, not with a feeling of panic or anxiety, but actually with a feeling of openness, creativity, and care that Sophie I'm sure will trouble in interesting and productive ways after this (laughing), but then we can think about these as a kind of extended progeny, as a kind of non-filial human progeny, that allow us to really rethink the terms and conditions of what we think of as reproduction, and linking it back to questions of reproductive justice. And especially in light of our increasingly non-reproductive futures, might there be something to be learned from queer theory and the embodiment of queer subjects that have never assumed biological reproduction to be the ultimate signifier of hope in the first place. So I'm going to end there and turn it over to Sophie.

Nottingham Contemporary

Sophie Lewis 00:24:50

Hi everyone. Wow. Thank you, Sofia, for bringing me together with Heather Davis. The admiration is mutual, and although I'm a little bit plagued by conversations that have been going on in my communities recently about the sort of hollowness of land acknowledgements by communists during events that aren't really connected to a concrete project to do anything about the problem of settler colonialism, I do, for now, simply want to say I am speaking from unceded Lenape territory known as Philadelphia, and, that is unbearable. (laughing) Thank you for your remarks, Heather. It's so wonderful to be here with you, and yeah, I'm glad, in a sense, that my statement isn't as finished as yours because I think this event will be better this way. I will, I hope we get to the, sort of the part where we're both on the screen at the same time fast. So what I will say is that despite thinking about this question for the past eight years or so, I'm actually just still full of ambivalence about the strategic reliability or desirability of concepts of kinship and queerness. It's basically long been my conviction that we must at minimum deromanticize these terms, but then perhaps I really think we need to jettison them entirely, sort of killing our darlings, as it were, or risk capitulating too much to the present state of things. I say this quite unworriedly because I don't, I feel this sensibility in your book, from what I've managed to read a bit, so I'm not sort of worried that this is some kind of terrible uncomradely fight. People often class my manifesto for a future horizon, or "Full Surrogacy," as a, quote, queer kinship utopia, and I hold my hands up and say I've totally contributed to that framing, or at least occasionally consented to it, or both. And perhaps we need to circle back in the Q and A to the question of utopia and what perhaps I understand that word to mean in a methodological sense and within a decolonial or a feminist Marxist project, which I basically take from my comrades, Dave Bell on the one hand, Madeline Lane-McKinley on the other. But if we stick with queer kinship, I think even when it is not remotely romanticized, and from what I see of your work, Heather, and I have just seen, you do not remotely romanticize. Perhaps the first thing I want to say is that it sounds appealing to me (laughing). Queer kinship sounds healing to me. It sounds necessary. And it sounds right to me. And it evokes the dialectic of mothering against motherhood that is sort of at the core of my theoretical endeavour. And it evokes a commitment to staying with the trouble, that sort of later Harawayvian term, and the trouble of a cyborgicity, specifically, which I was so delighted to see you put on your slide, because it's exactly what I, well, you probably know that. I'm sort of ongoingly

msdnittoN Contemporary

sort of troubled by in the most generative sense of the word. So, queer kinship, that's how I feel about it. Whereas family abolition sounds nauseating, paralyzing, vertiginous. And so ultimately, I have sometimes vacillated simply because that's what happens when you are insufficiently backed by a collectivity. When you're sort of alone on a stage as a commodified brand, doing events, including for wonderful art institutions, for wonderful thinkers and curators like Sofia Lemos, but this is kind of what happens to thought when it becomes marketized like this, you kind of, you back down, I think. I have backed down. I've lacked the ability to think these things through. 'Cause that's that's how thought is. Authorship can only ever be co-authorship, as I say, in my book, which then also has my book on the cover, and it's all just contradiction all the way down, but ultimately I think those who've pushed me over the last couple of years to clarify have been right. I think this is also my role in this loving and comradely conversation. My proposal is not really queer kinship, which is not to say I know what it is. And ultimately for me, the problem remains that relations of class, patriarchy, and coloniality traverse those fields. So i.e., your kin can be your colonizer or your rapist. Your kin might be someone who (indistinct) a caring act to starve or to attack or to disarm or to kill. And it is scary and difficult to retain courage in the face of the acute pain that one can appear to be inflicting, or that it can, that one is inflicting, by saying things like abolish the family, right? The term queer, as one is nowadays painfully reminded every Pride Month seems still to be teetering, on the one hand, on the point of complete implosion, like a complete evacuation of its anti-imperial freight, and on the other, it seems more necessary than ever before (laughing) in the face of new consolidations of attack on trans youth, for example. Chris Chitty recently in his Marxian history of the European biopolitical states regulation of queer sex has insisted on the queer as a name for an orientation to the state and towards property regimes. So not as a euphoric, or let alone, utopian identity. And then, with kin, I remember Christina Sharpe in her essay, "Lose Your Kin," reminding us that kinship relations structure the nation. So the question is sort of, I say kin all the time (laughing), and I think... Sorry, maybe Christina doesn't, I don't know. I don't know how people managed to operate. The sense of metaphor and its relation to sort of, I suppose, I even want to say language and struggle and practice. Can you sort of participate in a multi-species sort of kinning process, while bearing in mind that perhaps kinship is a metaphor we might want to lose (laughing) at some point. I love in your book, Heather, where you say that, where you point out that Michelle Murphy argues that Monsanto can be

Nottingham Contemporary

understood as a kind of grandkin, a toxic relation inscribed into energy infrastructures, white privilege, indigenous dispossession, anti-blackness, water, and metabolism. And you argue that these new bacteria and fungi generated by plastic production, circulation, and consumption can be understood as a queer kin asking us, as you just have, sort of what kind of offspring. I suppose that the really queer thing there is the offspring are also parents. And it kind of makes me think of the resonance of that with some of my arguments about the need to transgenerationalise mothering. And some of this is not fully thinkable because I don't think post-Oedipal thought is fully available (laughing) with Oedipally subjectivated. Damn. That's part of what cyborgicity is, right? This kind of statement that we make history not under conditions of our own choosing. And that includes our brains and our thoughts and our words, which is why Haraway is constantly now repeating this refrain from Strathern, I think, the "It matters what worlds world worlds." (laughing) So, yeah. So that these queer kin, these fungi and bacteria produced from, this is quoting you, "The matrix of chemical companies, "capital accumulation, modernity. "techno utopianism, and the creativity of bacteria." This is where my remarks really will stop feeling structured, but I just wanted to sort of invite you to react to my sort of dissatisfaction and love for these terms of kin making or queer and kinship and so on. I feel unwilling to be satisfied with them as placeholders or synecdoches for projects that might otherwise bear names like abolition or decolonization or communism. And I see enormous potency in and the necessity for labours taking place under the aegis of queer multi-species feminisms, yours prime among them, and your concern to, quote, "question the purity narratives "that are built around understandings of nature "and to open up eroticism, kinship, and care "to more than human relationships." Preach. I count myself as part of that rubric, by the way, I'm just... I'm not just thinking of my recent adventures as an inadvertent provocateur and populariser, and then thinker of octopus eroticism ever since my political coming of age as a teen via climate justice activism and direct action and ongoingly through my membership of the Out of the Woods Ecological Writing Collective. I think of myself as a multi-species feminist, and not to get too meta, but this is almost a question of disloyal daughterhood. (laughing) I am an ecofist, ecofeminist. Don't know what I just said. Ecofist? I'm thinking of the dildo inside your fish, Heather. So I am an ecofeminist, as Donna Haraway said to me, provocatively, she thought, on the occasion of our meeting. And I was like, "Yes," I said. (laughing) There was a sort of loving, comradely, dare I say almost sort of sisterly anger in the air between us,

msdnittoN Contemporary

because I had just written an intensely passionate love letter to the 1980s socialist landmark text that you just platformed, Heather, the “Cyborg Manifesto.” And then I sutured it to a critique of her 2017 book about kin making and depopulation of human species staying with the trouble. The latter of which I actually ended up saying was, ‘cause I just revisited this to see, not destructive enough. (laughing) And I write, “Part of our task is indeed not to forget “the stink in the air from the burning of the witches.” This is Haraway. “Not to forget the murders of human and non-human beings “in the great catastrophes named the Plantationocene, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene. “Part of it is...” I can’t believe I’m quoting myself, anyway, I’m doing it now. “To move through memory to re-presencing, “to grow capable of response, “to become kin and to stay with the trouble. “But the main thing is to make an altogether “bigger kind of trouble.” Was I guess my formula there, and I was relieved to see that in interviews with Fabrizio Terranova, Haraway was saying, “It’s really important to be in revolt. “We do have to be at war. “We do have to practice war. “We do have to be for some worlds and against others.” I guess my loyalty sort of remains with the cyborg as someone who knew who her enemies were and who knew what she wanted to unmake and destroy. (laughing) And I guess, yeah, my spidery kind of thoughts have been all over the place. I’m curious to know how we can kind of bring out very sort of similar projects and solidarities together in the dialogue. I want to bear in mind Christina Sharpe’s kind of sensibility that capitulation to the current configurations of kinship is a kind of continued enfleshment of the ghost. She calls, by the ghost she means slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship. And yeah, I suppose it does trouble me sometimes. It has, I’ve noticed people being troubled in an ungenerative way by the way that some articulations of multi-species kin making seem to glibly metaphorize relations across the human-nonhuman boundary that then sort of ride roughshod over the very real legacies of kind of human enslavement. So for instance conversations Haraway had with Anna Tsing recently about the Pantationocene did not translate well onto certain, into the metaphors of slavery cannot be transferred to plants, in my opinion. This is something that needs to be insisted on, I think, if the project of multi-species sort of flourishing and decolonial communist abolition are to be fused, and, mutated together into the future. Okay, I’ll pause there.

Sofia Lemos 00:40:51

So, thank you so much Sophie and Heather for your insights, for the provocations. I suppose there's already a question in the air from, or a need, a kind invitation for a response from Heather to Sophie's ambivalences and concerns. Maybe we can start there and take it forward.

Heather Davis 00:41:15

Yeah, thank you so much, Sofia, so generous your comments. I think I really share with you that kind of ambivalence. And I think that part of the reason why, I think the only time I've ever used kin in any of my writing is in these really bad relations. It's slightly abusive relations. And I think that, not to say that the bacteria and the fungus themselves are abusive, but certainly the conditions under which they emerge are without a doubt abusive and deeply colonial and deeply connected to the afterlives of slavery, deeply connected to these kinds of projects of white supremacy. And I think that, I think that for me, as a white settler, I think that part of this kind of this move, and maybe it's not a move for everybody, maybe this is really just a move for people like me, but a part of this move of wanting to claim these organisms as some kind of a relation is a move of responsibility. And it's a move of seeing that these things are, to a certain degree, my things, however much we want to take stock in those kinds of standards of ownership or possession. But if we, if we're still in a world where those kinds of concepts operate, and we very much are, then I feel like it is a certain kind of responsibility to understand, to understand our, my relations, to those particular objects that come about through these histories of white supremacy. And I think that, and so I think, in the book, it's like, really the only places where I talk about anything as kin is either plastic or oil, or I guess in the case of Michelle Murphy, it's like these, she draws upon her Metis traditions to think about, to think about Monsanto as a kind of grandkin, which I think is coming from a different type of lineage and a different kind of set of understandings of what kin and kin making means or is, which I wouldn't want to, I don't think it's my place to comment upon, but I really love this idea of, well how do we kind of work through these things and also keep this notion of family abolition? And I think one of the things that's so great in your book is that is actually that tension. All throughout there's this tension between queer kinship and kind of in dealing with the complications of trying to imagine a world where the surrogate, the surrogacy labour is like, first of all, no longer really considered labour under the conditions of advanced capitalism

msdnittoN Contemporary

that we find ourselves within. What would it actually mean to think about that? First of all, obviously in the conditions that we find ourself in, within the kinds of terms of how would that labour actually be adequately compensated or, much in the same way as you point out that sex workers have advocated for better working conditions, how would we, how do we advance better working conditions? But then above and beyond that, if the goal is really to abolish work in the ways in which we currently understand it, then I think that, I think that you're right. I think that also the goal should be some kind of family abolition. And then what does that do for thinkers? Again, like myself who don't come from the traditions, the indigenous traditions that many of the authors that I cite come from, and therefore understand kin and kin making within a very specific set of conditions and relations that you're very right to point out, are the conditions and relations of upholding and building things like the nation state and the kind of ongoing conditions of white supremacy and settler colonialism of these lands. And it's like, and how do we sort of but how would we build a kind of multi-species? I remember one of the questions you asked earlier was like can a kind of multi-species project also, a feminist project also be abolitionist? And I think that that's such an interesting question. I actually have no idea how to answer it, because (laughing) but I think it's an interesting one to kind of reiterate, because I think it gets at the tension of wanting to abolish something, abolish a kind of, I mean, I think that within the kind of really radical traditions of queer theory, I think in some ways it was like to really examine the conditions of kinship in order to have it explode. Like in order to kind of stretch it to the point where it no longer exists. And I feel like in some, to some degree I think that's what I'm kind of trying to do with thinking about this, but you're right. It's like, I'm still relying on these terms. So there's an inherent contradiction there. And (laughing) I think it's like, how do we think through those kinds of things? But I guess for me part of the thing that I was still attached to was I actually was attached to this idea, as you rightly point out, that your kin might be your colonizer or your rapist or somebody who you might kill. It's like, well, actually, if we do take that as the conditions of kinship, as part of the conditions of kinship, there is this kind of response, this kind of future-oriented responsibility there that's also linking us to these kinds of past biological and social reproductions. But that is something that I actually, in some ways, still feel attached to because of the structures that continue to enable those things to exist. I don't know if you want to add anything.

Nottingham Contemporary

Sophie Lewis 00:47:15

Wow, yes. It's really illuminated the, god, you know, I was about to say kinship. (laughing) You just can't kind of do without them somehow. Or maybe you can, just try harder, but no, it's true. This is really an analogous contradiction, I think, in an explorations endeavours scholarship. Yeah, thank you so much for your generous response. I guess it reminds me that maybe one of the things I abutted against a bit too late in the process of trying to gestate "Full Surrogacy Now" is that actually, yeah, there's a bit of a tension between abolitionism and some strains of indigenous and decolonial thought and practice. And I think multi-species feminism perhaps has stronger ties, in a sense, to indigenous, queer, and multi-species feminist thought, or that those two things are the same a lot of the time. And that's a really, that's, I suppose why, despite not being well-versed in, I don't know, Hegel or whatever, I think thinking about abolition with Ruthie Wilson Gilmore's kind of insistence on it as a kind of presencing and as a sort of, a word that doesn't mean that, well, I guess it depends who is talking and who is proposing the overarching, this can be problematic, but I think abolition could be very palatable or consonant or sort of saying the same thing as people who are interested in salvage and ancestors, and there's such a big seeming kind of chasm between, I was talking to you in an earlier conversation about my discomfort with, and love of, at the same time, that kind of "Braiding Sweetgrass" kind of ethos, which talks about mothering in a way that very informed by indigenous tradition, and you know, which seems, completely coherent and appealing, and at the same time, very sort of different from projects that have to do with, I guess, as I was saying in my review of Haraway, destruction of the things. The emphasis on destruction and on welcoming the migrant and the rootless, and the, I guess the sort of the valences of sort of antisemitism and rootless cosmopolitanism that are coming out in the current debates about trans youth, debates about already such a violent framing. And that seems to be such a sort of a difference in orientation. And I feel a sort of, almost schizoid or maybe like cyborg kind of affinity with both sides of these where I've, I can see how I might have ancestors. Some comrades of mine are very convinced about the ancestor discourse. And I love the idea in a sense that these fungi are my weird kin. The way I talk to my closest companion, this baby cat that I nurtured in October, because her gestator rejected her, and I actually became the mother cat, you know mother cats actually eat the faeces out of their young, 'cause the young are useless when they come out of a cat uterus. They

msdnittoN Contemporary

can't even defecate. So I'm a sort of, I'm a cat now (laughing). Or vice, I don't know. Where was I going with this? My way of talking to her is very kind of ambivalent. If this is kinship, then I see potential there, because, and it's not to everyone's taste, but I say you, "You're such a dickhead. "You're an absolute dickhead." Because she is, she bites me. She does nothing but bite me and wake me up. (laughing) But we're sort of skin to skin the entire time. I guess this is sort of maybe seemingly a really trivial point, but the willingness to talk about violence and mess and brutality as part of the web of care seems really crucial to me, actually. It's not just a tiny point. It's not just incidental. Care is not just fun and nice. It is accountability, and accountability is heart-breaking and heartrending and hard and ugly and rough and mean. (laughing) And that's, I guess I like etymology and care actually means that. Care means strife. Care and... I mean, being without a care in the world means, yeah, I guess you don't have to care for anyone. (laughing) Because it's hard work (laughing). I'm so sorry, I have to plug in. I'm going to mute. Sofia, will you bridge us over?

Sofia Lemos 00:52:59

Absolutely. So just as a very quick reference for our viewers, Sophie mentioned the book called "Braiding Sweetgrass," which is from 2015, if I'm not mistaken, by Robin Wall Kimmerer. If anyone is interested to pursue, we'll put a link up on the chat, but circling back to utopia and circling back to what utopian means within a decolonial and a feminist Marxist project. I wondered your thoughts, both of you, about this idea of claiming bad kin, which I think is very much at the forefront of what Heather is proposing, and what does that do to the project of utopia?

Heather Davis 00:53:47

I can maybe go first. I mean, I think I would actually, thank you so much, Sofia, for bringing that up. It's one of the things I wanted to ask Sophie about, because I find utopia so difficult to think with. It's something I kind of avoid (laughing) in my work. And in fact, I think the sort of, the closest thing I get to is like we just have to deal with the mess of the present and become more attached to it. Or not, maybe not more attached, more intimate is usually the expression that I use, that there's like, there is an invitation by the world to attend to the multiple manifestations, and we have a duty to be curious and accountable. And I think that if I do have a vision of utopia, I think it's, the closest that I would get, which I guess is like, but I mean, I'm not a utopian

Nottingham Contemporary

thinkers, so again, maybe my ideas around this concept are actually totally misguided, but I think a lot about, if I am going to approach something like that it really is actually with that sense of accountability that Sophie, you were just talking about, the ways in which it requires showing up for the violent, dirty, gross moments in each other's lives. Whether they be humans or other than humans. It's like, it's the way in which we have to show up, and I think that that, kind of whether we like it or not. I think that that is actually, that's actually the closest thing I can get to utopia because I think that in the world, in which, from what I understand, for example of the kind of abolitionist project, it is a two-fold project of both completely undoing the world as it is. Like Denise Ferreira da Silva writes that decolonization is the complete undoing of the world, like the total and utter undoing of the world. And I think that that is true. I think that both the abolitionist project and the decolonial project are both projects that involved the complete undoing of the world, but unlike the kind of anarchist bro version (laughing) of that undoing, which sometimes I can get on board with, but sometimes deeply irritates me. It's like, is the fact that that also involves these, this deep sense of commitment and accountability to each other in the process of having to build something else. And that's the incredibly hard work. And I think that's the thing that we often, we often want to avoid. But I'm never quite sure how, like, yeah, I would love to hear more of your thoughts on how you think about yourself as a utopian. What does utopia mean for you? How does utopia figure for you?

Sophie Lewis 00:56:49

Yeah, I think my concept, not so many years ago, was probably quite unreconstructed, and simply a word that I lit upon that seemed to maybe evoke my, I don't know, my relentlessness or something (laughing). But then I actually, post hoc, kind of was educated about it. And as I understand it, there is, I mean there is a lot of descensus in utopian studies, and people are using it in bad ways. And then there's a lot of people saying, nope there's a long tradition of utopianism that is about an on the ground kind of negationism that just insists, almost pig headedly, with almost the sort of the eyes of a child or something, that this does not have to be the world, but not a remaking of a world, just an insistence that another world is possible. To quote the incredibly over familiar slogan, and yeah, and that's really all I suppose. But people do call me up on it because I mean it's got a colonial history, it means, in one of its genealogies, building an island over there where everything is somehow to be designed anew from on top. But I think, yeah, I think there are a lot of

msdnittoN Contemporary

brilliant decolonial scholars putting this term to use to make sure that we keep hold of the speculative fictions, the sort of watery dreams, the afrofuturisms, the sort of, the sheer breadth of possibility that sometimes falls out when you, that's what it stands for. The kind of the importance of speculative fabulation, I guess. Yeah (laughing). Yeah.

Sofia Lemos 00:59:12

I see an interesting crossover here around this idea that negation is an insistence upon the possibility of another world, and, Heather, in your book, you speak, which is coming out this summer, correct? Not yet, but it will be soon on bookshelves everywhere. I'm sure. But you discussed queerness as the sort of non-teleological orientation to time. And this is as well a form, as I understand it, of negationisms, negationism of the kind of reproducing of social order. So I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about other ways in which you mobilize non-linearity within the framework of what you call petrotime, for example.

Heather Davis 01:00:01

Yeah. I mean, I think, as Sophie just pointed out that we can think about, we can almost think about these kinds of oily relations as both our grandkin and our progeny simultaneously. So we're like, we are being, that our children are our ancestors, and I think that this is actually, I mean, yeah, I think that you're right, Sophie, that utopia is also these, all these speculative fabulations that are so deeply important to feminist projects of all kinds, but also, yeah, afrofuturism, indigenous futurism, all of these kinds of ways of holding space for what has been and what will be, but the kind of collapse of those things is often what's so interesting is that the present isn't just the present. It is also the past and the future simultaneously. And one of the ways I've been sort of thinking about this in relationship to oil is obviously the oil itself is compressed time. And that climate change we could think about as the kind of release of all of that compressed time. And so then, but then what we're seeing is not just, it's not just the speeding up of time, which is obviously happening. We're seeing rates of atmospheric warming that are completely unprecedented in terms of geologic time. We're seeing rates of extinction that are unprecedented in terms of biological time. So the rate at which things are happening now is completely different than anything that the earth has seen as far as we know, but there's also all of these ways in which there's these forced slowdowns or

Nottingham Contemporary

the ways in which, for example, a lot of the firefighters on the West Coast are people who are incarcerated. And the fact that the fires that happened last summer were so out of control, the West Coast of the United States, and the fact that the fires were so out of control last summer was, in part, the ways in which the pandemic was spreading through prisons. And so many people were unable to go and do those jobs at that point in time. I mean, and this speaks to so many of the kind of horrific entanglements of our present, but I think it also speaks to the ways in which we could also think about something... So that's like the slowing down of human time. Or we can also think about the slowing down of human time via climate refugees and the kinds of forced waiting that so many people are, so much so that that kind of forced waiting is imposed upon so many people as they're being forcibly displaced by various types of disasters related to climate change. So that the kind of effect of, the net effect of this kind of explosion of time through fossil fuels is not just a kind of, a linear trajectory. It's not just the speeding up. It's also the speeding up and the collision and the kind of the ways in which things are slowed down also. And that doesn't just happen in terms of human perception or the forced immobility of human bodies, but also the ways in which something like late latency works, and the ways that Michelle Murphy describes it. So that there is no real linear relation between cause and effect, or if there is it's a multi-generational project. It's not a, we have to think intergenerationally in order to really account for the ways in which something like petrotime would be functioning, but that's not, it's not just a kind of progressivist notion.

Sofia Lemos 01:04:08

Sophie, would you like to respond to?

Sophie Lewis 01:04:11

I would love to ask for more, perhaps, reflection, I mean, with me. It just makes me think about the importance of a kind of disability liberationist lens on this, on the entire question of sort of caretaking and a love of the always, already plural, sort of body and flesh. So we have these, symbionts crawling all up inside us, well, us, but I mean (laughing) yeah. And some of them now are kind of, yeah, I mean, some of them are looking increasingly kind of alien, I guess, is part of what I'm getting from your research. And so, that, I suppose the cyborg told us in the 80s that this was sort of ever thus (laughing) There's no pure sort of, well... It's not a sort of completely transhistoric thing. Cyborgicity

msdnittoN Contemporary

kind of on one telling begins when you cook food, when you start making your body with technology is like fire. But then within this process of industrial capital, that, as you're saying, is kind of exploding in petrotime today, yeah, we have no memory of, yeah, of a pre-sort of colonized by plastics. It's not that simple, is it? Do you have an origin point? So I guess I'm wondering how do we all, how do we link this to some of the sorts of Crip kinship projects? This is a very unstructured question. Sorry. Yeah, I'm thinking with Alexis Shotwell and the sort of, and her book on purity, and these seem like very consonant projects. Weirdly enough, I was listening to Silvia Federici recently talking about reproductive politics, and she was sort of inveighing against, I don't know who she was sub-tweeting, but she was inveighing against a new sterile feminist politics. That she said, she didn't say who (laughing) but she actually said that there's a tendency to act as though maternity in and of itself is oppressive. And I was thinking, who is that? 'Cause I don't, is that a straw man? I don't, I know that queer theory did the kind of Lee Edelman no future moment. And then everybody critiqued it, and we all, we all did. I mean, I feel like, Jose Esteban Munoz said, "Yeah, some good points, but we're not going to be matrophobic "and we're all going to do mothering." So it sort of makes me, it makes me really curious about this kind of strange afterlife, this kind of return of a politics that, for me, was generative. So in the 70s people, class, sort of orthodox-ish Marxist feminists were saying, the workplace of the home needs to go (laughing). Explode that, literally, that weird insinuation in the word nuclear family. That it could maybe explode. (laughing) We don't want homes with kitchens in them. This was one of the utopian feminist demands in the 70s. Don't build homes with kitchens because then people will start cooking only for themselves. Just don't include a kitchen in a home. That'll encourage bad behaviour (laughing). And for me, wages against housework was this family abolitionist imaginary. They said every miscarriage is a workplace accident. And I said, oh, gotcha, wow, that's so felt provoking. But now there's a bit of a sense, I think, that that same genealogy of feminism is actually quite opposed to queer kin making. And I'm curious why that is. And I think for some reason there's something about purity and disability and, femmeness. I think plastics are somehow aligned with the femme for me. I don't know if that, do you want to just respond to that part and ignore all the other rambling?

Heather Davis 01:08:56

No, I mean, I have to say maybe just like two things. One is I think that you're right. I think that in these discussions of climate change, and I have to say

that this is something that I basically know nothing about, but it would be so wonderful if there was more Crip theory centred. Because I do think that one of the things that we're really seeing is this kind of, I mean, as all Crip theorists point out is anybody who's able-bodied, it's just a temporary state (laughing). And so this is something that we all have to grapple with in our own embodiments, but I think that this is something that is increasing because of the kind of saturation of petrochemicals and the effects of climate change. So, I certainly think that, yeah, I mean, it was sort of a fantasy at one point to sort of really dive into that literature, and then I realized that my multi-disciplinary, disciplinarity had kind of gotten a little too out of hand (laughing) and then I was just like, I just can't do it, but I think other people really should. And I'm sure there are lots of other people who actually are doing that work. So it's just my own ignorance that leads me to not be able to name their names. But I totally agree. And I would also say that I think that one of the things that's really interesting, both about wages for housework, but also about the ways in which you talk in your book about gestation is both that gestation is always work, but also the ways in which the foetus is this kind of alien being, that doesn't have just this kind of, we have such a romantic association with mothering and maternity in that way. And I think that that really disregards a lot of people's actual experiences. And as you point out, very rightly, the actual ways in which the foetus is really sucking from the body of the person that it's in. But also that, I think that you're right in terms of, that you're definitely right to point out the relationship between plastic and femmeness. I mean, plastics, the reason why plastics are potentially harmful to reproductive cycles or to it just endocrine systems in general, which regulate virtually everything in the human body is precisely because it, all of the phthalates, the classification of chemicals known as phthalates, which are highly associated with plastics because of their, because of the ability to make something a particular colour or heat resistant or whatever a plastics manufacturer wants. All of those, that classification of chemicals mimics oestrogen in the body. So there is this very literal kind of biological relationship. And it's very interesting to trace the ways in which sex, and especially the binary of sex has really shifted over the course of the 20th century to now being so thought of and regulated through hormones rather than other sex markers or modes of differentiation, such as chromosomes or secondary sex characteristics, or other of these kinds of things. There's such a fixation at the moment on questions of hormones. And I think, in part, for good reason. Hormones really transform the body (laughing). You can do amazing things with hormones, and there's really amazing projects

msdnittoN Contemporary

like Mary Magicc's project where she encourages folks to make esgen so that people who want more oestrogen in their bodies can do that at home as a kind of DIY project. But yes, there is this association, but I also think that there's something about plastic that both is kind of maternal in a certain sense, in the sense of it being this kind of protein substance, but it really is associated with a kind of Khora from Plato's Philosophy, or also thinking about, and the kind of malleability of that substance in a kind of patriarchal mode. Just going to, sorry, I don't know if that made sense at the end, sorry.

Sophie Lewis 01:13:35

Wow, I've been thinking about the, I wonder if it's fair to say sort of rush to condemn plastic in some spheres of environmental activism contemporarily, and whether there is, as part of that, an obfuscation of the social relations masking as economic fact, which produced climate crisis, and then maybe plastics, I guess this is, I think I get this from you, really. I don't know, sorry. Correct me if I'm misrepresenting you. It seems to me plastics become, yeah, this neat alibi for what is actually social relations, just to be a boring Marxist, right? And then plastic becomes sort of untrustworthy. It has no innate form. It's artificial, it's cheap, and it has enabled a limited degree of equality through consumerism. And so that's kind of maybe partly why plastic is sort of aligned with the femme, the queer or so, the rootless, the migrant, the cyborgian, and maybe, the relatively poor consumer, and so I'm really thinking how this collides, and your project is so needful in the way that it confronts and challenges a certain kind of ecoromanticist, anti-capitalism that is part of a bestiary of crypto or not so crypto fascisms that are arising in this moment, and claiming your bad kin is one of these necessary tools we need to take up to confront that, that rise of a certain purity politics and ableism, but that's, it's also important to say it's a mistake to celebrate plastics. This is why the "Cyborg Manifesto" inspires us both, because of that resistance of both, and the willingness to think about being illegitimate offspring of militarism, technocapitalism, colonialism, and yet here we are, right? There is no other body we have. We have to actually deal with it. You know? We have to abolish ourselves. Sounds really hard. It is really hard. It's really scary. We can only do it together with a certain amount of empathy and a certain amount of destructiveness and courage to destroy it. And not to just say, care, care, care, care, this kind of weirdly obfuscatory way, because yeah, celebrating plastics is a sort of other mistake because it also isolates them from the social forces that produce them, and those social forces leave plasticity as the only option

for so many on this earth. (sighing) You've taught me so much. Thank you.

Sofia Lemos 01:16:54

Sophie, I have just sort of writing this segue I have a question for you with regards to the manuscript that you're preparing as a guide book to anti-liberatory feminisms, and in our conversations the figure of the romantic maternalistic that embodies nationalists, existentialists, imaginaries of nature has sort of come up. And I was wondering if you could tell us more about this figure, but also how, what does that do to multi-gendered, multi-racial, and eventually multi-species, echofeminist positions? How can they organize against this very idea of nature that the romantic maternalist figure, a feminist is talking about?

Sophie Lewis 01:17:53

Hmm, yeah, gosh. Big question. Yeah, I'm really interested in the history of this kind of maternalist feminism, which, again, seems to be having a bit of a return with mothers invoking motherhood in some instances as the source of their authority to antagonize and unmake trans life, for example. Mother knows best. In fact, sometimes, the most horrible speeches, I've unfortunately ducked my head in the kind of toxic vat of trans hostile philosophy for several years now, because I think it's, yeah I think it's important for those of us who can stomach it and are perhaps less immediately vulnerable to its violence, to do that work and to actually try and trace an etiology. Not to understand in an empathic way, actually, but to understand the risk of seduction by it. How are we seduced by bioconservative modes of thought? Sometimes this, my anecdote was simply going to be that trans exclusionary so-called radical feminists often actually say, with very little shame, my daughter said to me today that she was a boy. I know she's not a boy. I was like, no, you really don't (laughing). Thinking about kinship that way as a disciplinary processes or so. Or perhaps we need to separate their family, that's family, kinship against family. I'm very debonair. It's probably incredibly irritating. Sophia when you were introducing me, you said, you stuttered very briefly, and you were going to say family against feminism. And since you've now asked me about my, my next book, I almost want to say, I mean, it's not, I don't do it glibly, but there is a sense in which, when you take into account the Plantationocene, and there have been real families against the family, in the sense of real families against the state. And I think dialectical understandings

msdnittoN Contemporary

of this, of the construction of the family, bearing in mind that kinship is always made, not given, but it's a fantasy about givenness, leads us to understand that paradoxically, some of the least familial places on earth are our family. But this is where the rape happens, and feminists in the 60s and 70s used to say that all the time. I don't know why we don't say it anymore. It seems really not said. Do you agree with that, Heather? You don't really get this sense that the home is not a sanctuary. And then COVID happened, and suddenly editors were all contacting me saying, "Oh, "maybe the nuclear household isn't good. "Do you want to write about that?" I was like, that's very interesting. That suddenly it's more imaginable that we might need to live not in nuclear households. So maternalist feminism has a long history of leading the charge for eugenic campaigns, for policing, and reproducing segregation. There are all these books coming out about this, female slave holders, and there's a lot of books on white feminism specifically, and it's genealogies, but I guess, yeah, thanks for asking me about it, Sophia. I'm not very far along writing it and have been stalled for some time, but I'm hoping to try and do something that looks at different flavours, not just white, and links them to a kind of mistaken understanding of the human body's relationship to things like work. So this is why it does really relate, I think, to questions and directions and trajectories like Heather's, because it's about purity, and it's about the fantasy that through resisting certain kinds of work and certain kinds of contamination by artificiality and commodification you can kind of maybe protect the category of womanhood. And "The Handmaid's Tale" franchise is a fantastic example of that. You know, I am so grumpy about that franchise. I just, I don't like it. It seems really clear to me that it is inviting a lot of people, particularly in the aftermath of Hillary Clinton's failure to become president, to, who could, anyway, sorry. To fantasize a world in which the dividing line really was sex (laughing). And in that world you would have to be a fascist to not be a feminist of a certain kind. And the definition of feminism would be so clear in "The Handmaid's Tale." I don't want to assume everyone's watched it, but that's basically the fantasy. It's like imagine a world in which feminism was completely simple, and it didn't have to be intersectional. You wouldn't have to think about capitalism. You wouldn't have to think about colonialism. It would just be, oh my god, people are farming uteruses. Thank God, we love fantasizing about that because it's so easy. And we actually wish we were in that world or something. God, no. So that's the kind of feminism I'm criticizing.

Nottingham Conundrum

Sofia Lemos 01:24:15

So continuing on the uterus, I'm going to read one of the questions that is coming out from the audience. And it's from Conundrum Esoterica who says, "First of all, #ecofistingforclimatesurvival, "and then follows with a question, "I'm wondering if you could talk "a little bit about the concept of childhood "from your perspective regarding actual human, "parenthesis, queer and trans children, "not so much the Edelmanian paranoia, "but perhaps this this may be a bit of "an obscure reference for a lot of people. "So let's focus on speaking about childhood "and queer and trans children, specifically." Perhaps Heather, you could.

Heather Davis 01:24:58

Yeah, I mean, I think... Thanks for that question. I also really love that hashtag, so I was actually thinking that (laughing) (indistinct) when you made that slip, but not that exact hashtag, that is so much better, but I was like, I don't know if we should just leave ecofisting (laughing) (indistinct) maybe that is something we need to think about, but, yeah, the question about actual children. It's funny because I feel like it's really hard for me to, well, how do I say this? A lot of people have done really amazing work on questions of the child and children. I think the foremost amongst them is Rebekah Sheldon's beautiful amazing book called "The child to Come," where she really kind of delves into this question of both actual children and the figure of the child. So that the ways in which, when you look at Heather Lattimer who has also done work on this, and when you look at sort of, especially right-wing Christian images of anti-abortion campaigns, and you all also pair those images with a lot of the stuff coming out of the environmental movement, much of it is the same. And I think that, you know both of their points in that is that much of the kind of investment upon the part of, let's say kind of normative environmental activists is precisely this kind of continuity, not of the actual ability to reproduce or for children to exist, but rather for, rather for the social order as it currently stands to reproduce itself. That we don't want a future... We still don't want, there still is the fear of the black planet. We still don't want that future. We still want the beautiful white child with the blue eyes and the blonde hair. We still want that as the future, as the kind of collective future. We don't want the brown, gender queer kid who is trans-femme or whatever, whatever, whoever they are. That there's still so much pushback against that, despite the kind of advances that we've made. In terms of actual children, though, like real children, I mean, I

msdnittoN

Contemporary

think that it's maybe not such a, I mean I think this is a little bit out of my area of expertise, but I would actually just say that I think that, I think that one of the things that is really amazing to see is the fact that so much of the climate justice movement is being led by black and brown queer kids. And it's like, some of the people who are at the head of the very famous lawsuit against the U.S. government for taking away their right to a future is being led by black and brown queer youth. And so I think that, but I also think that sometimes there's this way in which those of us who are no longer children want to pin hope and responsibility on those to come. And I think that that is an unethical move. It's like, we've been around in this world longer. It's our responsibility. Not people who've just got here. So I don't, that's what I would say. I mean, it's also their responsibility, but I think we need to, I think there's sometimes there's such a kind of move to being like, oh, well, the children will fix it or this is really the children's problem, or whatever. And it's like, that's always really irritated me as a kind of politic. I hope that answers your question adequately.

Sofia Lemos 01:29:13

Sophie, do have any sort of contribution that you want to make to this idea of the child metonymically standing for the future?

Sophie Lewis 01:29:17

I think what Heather said was perfect, really. It echoed, I don't know if consciously or not, what Jules Gill-Peterson has been tirelessly saying in the face of all the anti-trans legislation to all the media outlets who finally are paying attention to people who have been saying this for a long, long time, the trans child is not new. And the very moving thing that Jules said was also that until we collectively want the trans child, we don't deserve them. (laughing) We don't deserve them. Yeah, I mean, children used to be tentative subjects of liberationist politics in the long 60s, that we've lost. We, I mean, a liberationist left has lost a lot of ground. We got defeat. I mean, I feel like you have to say this in almost every discussion, right? Like there was a sort of, the sky has cracked open a little bit in the long 60s. Things seemed possible. Things seemed thinkable. Including children's liberation. And the 80s came and crushed that. I mean, we lost, we got defeated, we got crushed. The worst of the worst wrote the history about what happened. I mean, not uniformly, but certainly with feminism. The people who were bioconservative, millenarian, and just generally shit at the time, recognized as such by their antagonists

Nottingham Conterary

and fellow travellers, some of whom were trans. Although, I also want to resist the thing where you have to have a perfect history of trans people being there all along to ground your utopian project or whatever, but whatever. The cultural feminists wrote the history of what radical feminism was, and they're completely wrong. So a lot of trans historians have had to do this work of kind of unmaking that wrong history and that wrong story about what, of what the second wave is. That may have not been directly relevant. But the figure of the child used to be a figure of a liberation as part of the proliferation of women's liberationist, gay liberationist anti-capitalism in a prior moment. And I think we need to, I don't know, I don't know what to say in this moment. It's... Accusations of the most horrifying nature fly when you try and open up the possibility of an autonomous, children's-led politics. I mean, people, our, my comrades and I are accused of what you can imagine. You can imagine what, in this moment, it becomes. It's, grooming, it's paedophilia, and so on. And there is a great fear of touching the subject, and there is a great lack of courage and solidarity around it. Yeah, Out of the Woods has talked a bit about the figure of the child, and written things, and revised them, changed their mind a bit about the inflection needed. I think it remains important to criticize the category of childhood. I mean, Shulamith Firestone, who is one of my problematic faves, got it wrong. She said, abolish childhood, or down with childhood, but it's obviously the opposite, really, I mean, or both. Abolish adulthood would probably be better in terms of that being the category that capitalism has really managed to lay claim to as a productive phase. And so for me, a lot of the paths go back to anti-work. Are we able to love, really, really love un- and non-productive, and even anti-productive life? You know? I think maybe that even links to plastics, 'cause they kind of, maybe they jam fertility or make fertility too much or something. They mess with productivity, perhaps? This may be some kind of link there, but a lot of the paths here with children, as Malcolm Harris says, being conscripted increasingly into work, but they nevertheless sort of stand for the future worker, and I think... And the trans child is a sort of sexualized desiring subject. How dare they? Weird. Sort of perverting of the innocence of the child that we want to project into the future. Yeah. Sorry. I don't usually wear earbuds. And I think when I wear earbuds I just sort of yell inchoately.

Sofia Lemos 01:34:40

It wasn't inchoately at all, but I am aware of time, and it's been close to amazing two hours. So if possible, I will end with a question, and I would

msdnittoM Contemporary

like to end on the, on where we began on speculative fiction, on speculative fabulation, and I want to read one of my favourite quotes from a “Full Surrogacy Now,” which goes, quote, “We have a need of fictions, art works, and dreams “to help us train our minds to the question “of what those prospects look and feel like “lightening the way,” unquote. And I understand that you both collaborate with artists often, and I would like you to share your experience with our viewers, how has artistic practice permeated and influenced your thinking?

Heather Davis 01:35:37

Oh, gosh, so much. I mean, I feel like the original kind of ideas for the plastic book really came with, came from and with so many late night conversations with Pinar Yoldas who did this beautiful project Ecosystem of Excess where she imagines how various creatures would adapt their internal organs to be able to successfully digest and live in this kind of plastic soup. And I think sort of mirroring that, but coming from a different political place, is also Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s work about from the “M Archive” where she really talks about the ways in which we are going to need these kinds of morphologies, these kinds of queer morphologies, or actually I shouldn’t say we. Black feminism is going to need these kinds of queer morphologies. The kind of, that in order to encounter what is coming, there’s a way in which, for her in that beautiful book, there’s a kind of return to the ocean of her ancestors, but the return that is a liberatory return, a return where it adapts queer and trans becomings borrowed from fish and other creatures, frogs, in order to be able to imagine a world otherwise. And I think just in general, so much of my thinking about everything, really, has come from inspiration of artists of various kinds, particularly the visual arts, because I’ve really long believed that the visual arts is its own form of theorization, and one that is particularly adept at being able to hold the kinds of contradictions that I think that we struggle through as theorists that feel like they, there’s a kind of demand within theory sometimes, I think, for there to be certain kinds of resolutions. And I think that what’s really beautiful about the visual arts is there’s no such demand. In fact, there’s kind of, the tensions are really what is often on display. And I think that that, to me, really speaks to the truth world.

Sophie Lewis 01:38:07

Damn, I’ve got nothing that eloquent. I’m pretty ignorant when asked about

Nottingham Contemporary

sort of art, but I guess if I relax and think about it. Yeah, well, my only real artistic talent is making paragraphs that maybe are good (laughing). I like literature. I like words. But then, yeah, I mean, I've had to be dragged into sort of engagement with art. I mean, Haraway has an essay about Patricia Piccinini's surrogate sculptures, and they were, they continue to colonize my imagination in the best way, the way that I was thinking of them throughout your talk, Heather, in terms of the sort of plastics that are already in your kid's crib, nursing, touching your child, messing with the procreation of your DNA. I guess artists do stuff with my words. That's great. This is a collection by Jennifer Teets and Margarida Mendes, which is a sort of watery anthology, which is beautifully made. There was also a collective in the Netherlands, the Rietlanden Women's Office that mixed and mashed my amniotechnics essay together with a text by Frances Beal from the Third World Women's Alliance from 1969. And it's this absolutely exquisite iris printed newspaper that includes all these different possibilities and new vistas and horizons by virtue of juxtaposition. It's a fantastic thing. I don't know, yeah (laughing). I think art is obviously incredibly important. I just, I can only do it when made to by my comrades (laughing).

Sofia Lemos 01:40:22

Thank you so much, Heather and Sophie. I think it's fair for us to end here, perhaps on a note on openness, creativity, and care, as a way against the anxiety and fear of all these narratives that we've been going through, but also thinking that perhaps survival is a way of abolishing, or the way to survival is abolishing ourselves. But I guess, there's so many questions to be asked, so many conversations to be had, and I want to thank everyone who joined us this evening, who is online, who viewed, who is going to view this video in the future as well. And be welcome to write to us and pose your questions, and above all else, thank you so much, Sophie and Heather for your time, for your availability to be here with us today and for sharing your wisdom with us. Thank you.

COLOPHON

Curator: Sofia Lemos

Assistant Curator: Ryan Kearney

Technician: Catherine Masters