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Technopioneers, raw material workers or new eugenicists? Queer perspectives on reproductive technologies

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Abstract: The article discusses three different theoretical traditions towards assisted reproductive technologies (ART): queer-feminist approaches, Marxist feminisms and Disability Studies. Deploying the form of a semi-fictional walk, the contribution explores the differences and dissonances in the approaches to reproductive technologies. While queer-feminist approaches in ARTs see new potentials of kinship and queer family making, Marxist feminisms approach ARTs as new forms of labour and exploitation. Disability Studies approaches problematize whether ARTs result in new eugenics.

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Technopioneers, raw material workers or new eugenicists? Queer perspectives on reproductive technologies¹

Technopioneers

“Twelve lesbian couples vying for the favor of a gay couple. Not nice!” Louisa grimaces in disgust as she talks about visiting an advice center that organizes meetings between LGBTIQ* couples who want to have children. It is late Saturday evening. We are sitting in the GLITCH, a queer mini club that Louisa has opened successfully in Schöneberg after Corona, drinking Vodka Tubi. Above the bar is a picture of Tabea Blumenschein. Below it, in neon letters, is the credo of the early queer punk icon: “I do not make myself ugly to displease men, but beautiful to please women.” Someone plays “Living Right” by Black Cracker.

Louisa had not wanted to have children for a long time and consciously decided against freezing sperm before her gender reassignment surgery. As a lesbian woman, she no longer wanted to have anything to do with “that kind of bodily fluid”. Then, two years ago, she fell in love with Ernika, a trans*desiring femme who wants to have children. Absolutely. At some point, Ernika’s desire to have children became Louisa’s own. And tonight it is once again about the logistics of this wish: How to get the sperm? Should we ask our friend Heiner? Or should we go through a sperm bank? Is it enough to simply inject the sperm or do we need more complex reproductive technologies?² Is it better for Ernika to be inseminated or should we ask a friend? The ‘child question’ should be resolved collectively anyway, and the issue of biological motherhood might become

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2 The term Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART) is used to refer to medico-technological procedures such as IVF, egg donation, or surrogacy that detach human reproduction from sexed bodies and organize reproductive labour through technological means. From a feminist perspective, the term is employed critically, as these technologies may expand forms of reproductive autonomy while simultaneously reproducing or intensifying existing power relations – particularly along lines of gender, class, and global inequality – by rendering female bodies, care work, and fertility subject to control, commodification, or exploitation. The “new” invoked in the term thus denotes less a radical novelty than a historical rupture in which longstanding patriarchal patterns of regulating and instrumentalizing female reproduction are continued in technologically and globally reconfigured forms; what is genuinely “new” therefore lies primarily in the technologization and globalization of reproductive labour, rather than in any dissolution of the power relations on which it rests.

less of an issue between Louisa and Ernika. A gaze, pregnant with significance, is directed towards Melinda, who dances in front of us, lost in thought.

I am not sure if it is the amphetamine-like effect of the Tubi, but my mind starts to wander. Our repro talk once again gets to the heart of what and how much queers have to manage if they want to have their own child. And how many actors, desires and materials are involved. Heiner once said with a proud grin that queer friends asked him several times for sperm. Presumably because of his trustworthiness. He willingly undergoes HIV tests. He does not want to make demands on the child later on or get involved in his friends' relationships. Nevertheless, he would like to be a father himself, not just 'a producer'. As a 'pretty boy', a *Bübchen*, straight women wanted him for an *amour fou*, but as an eternally precarious artist, not for the role of father.

Today, queers can use reproductive technologies to elegantly circumvent such entanglements. Sperm banks, the freezing of sperm and/or in vitro fertilization (IVF), the fusion of egg and sperm cell in a test tube, pull apart the reproductive process that has long been considered 'natural' and can question the heterologic of human reproduction on various levels:

At the level of sexual practice: With IVF, the creation of an embryo in the laboratory, (cis-)heterosexual intercourse can be bypassed for the conception of a child. The embryo created in this way is no longer the result of more or less erotic penetrative sex, but a technological process: the insertion of prepared sperm into the egg in a test tube using a pipette (Nordqvist 2018, 267; Halberstam 2008, 267).

At the level of the sexual body: the pregnant body no longer necessarily has to be the intelligible female body. With the help of technological reproduction, other sexual bodies can come into play. This is because the egg cell fertilized in the laboratory can be implanted in a woman whose body is classified as clearly female. However, the embryo can also be implanted in a person who is intersex or in a man with a uterus, as was the case with Thomas Beatie, for example (Beatie 2008; Krishnan 2017).

At the level of kinship and family: Finally, queer forms of kinship can emerge that transcend the boundaries of the conventional cisgender heteronormative nuclear family. Conventional notions of family and kinship are called into question when, for example, a lesbian cis woman has two of her eggs fertilised with sperm from a sperm bank and the embryos are implanted in her wife and another male friend who has undergone female-to-male reassignment but has also decided not to have his ovaries removed.

Finally, sperm banks, cryopreservation and IVF in queer family arrangements also replace male figures like Heiner and mean even greater indepen-

dence from the male body as well as from the heteronormative reproductive spectacle including penis-in-vagina intercourse, binary sexed bodies and the nuclear family.

Heteronormative German biopolitics

In Germany, however, the queer potential of technologies is countered by a heteronormative family and technology policy that aims to prevent the queer journey of reproductive substances. Sperm and in-vitro embryos should not travel to any other than the unambiguous female body, where they should lead to the child of a heterosexual, preferably married couple.

Although some German sperm banks also sell to single women, lesbians and/or queers and clinics do practice artificial insemination for queers today, some doctors are still guided by outdated guidelines from the German Medical Association. In 2006, these guidelines restricted the possibility of 'heterologous' sperm donation to couples in 'stable' heterosexual relationships. To this day, homosexual couples have to pay for all laboratory tests, medication and procedures themselves, while health insurance companies cover half the cost of three IVF attempts for heterosexual couples. In short: German biopolitics still classifies queers as 'undesirable' reproductive citizenship subjects and makes access to reproductive technologies immensely more difficult for them.

The logical *counter*-reaction in queer contributions to reproduction is a critique of the exclusion from the category of the 'reproductive citizen' and the queer-theoretical explication of technological potentials. Queer interest groups, activists and theorists advocate for general and free access to technologies. Laura Mamo, for example, describes queer reproductive justice as "a right to reproduce (or not) with safe, affordable, accessible and equitable technologies" (Mamo 2018, 25). In an interview with Regina Michalik, Judith Butler sees the main target of queer reproductive politics as "a question of politics of access" (Michalik 2001), and for trans* people like Trystan Reese, using reproductive technologies in the process of becoming a parent with as few restrictions as possible means "deciding everything for yourself" (Krishnan 2017), i.e. less state, authorities and consultations between yourself and your own child.

However, queer theorists have also criticised the demands for access. Some queer theorists classify the queer use of reproductive technologies as a simple assimilation to traditional heteronormative ideals of parenthood and family – as a rejection of queer visions of family and (elective) kinship (Duggan 2002, 179; Mamo 2018, 24; Stacey 2018, 5). More empirically oriented approaches in turn criticise this criticism as ideological: such queer theorists would impose a

double ethical burden on queers with biological desires for children; 'double' because rainbow families would now have to assert themselves against this queertheoretical criticism in addition to the permanent questioning of their status as 'good reproductive' subjects (Smietana/Twine 2015, 114). The queer use of reproductive technologies is something progressive (Regenbogenfamilien NRW 2020), a narrative of reproductive loss and grief (Smietana et al. 2015) has given way to a new, positive-procreative consciousness with the spread of technologies from around the turn of the millennium (Berkowitz 2007). Whereas it used to be said: "I am a lesbian and will not have children", women today say as a matter of course: "I can be a lesbian and a mother" (Regenbogenfamilien NRW 2020; Pralat 2018).

Raw material workers

The next day, I meet another friend. We cycle to her garden collective in Britz for an autumnal harvest. Dana is a sociologist and is researching transnational reproduction routes and new gendered labour relations in contemporary capitalism in her post-doctoral project at Frankfurt's Goethe University. A car drives up close. Dana slows down and pulls into the middle of the lane. The driver honks, becomes more and more aggressive, wants to hit us. We flee into a side street. Dana screams out of breath: "That car is a weapon! The car kills!"

In the garden, Dana tells me that women in Spain account for fifty percent of 'egg production' for Europe and that twenty-five percent of them are migrants from Eastern Europe. The prospect: double the minimum wage. The buyers, in turn, are women and couples from materially richer countries such as Germany, who chose Spain because of its good clinical and tourist infrastructure – and first and foremost because they want a *white* baby. For Dana, this is simply a postcolonial, albeit purely White, reproductive project in which a small group of privileged women exploit other women. She speaks of "post-colonial Whiteness" because women from Romania, Ukraine or Latvia are generally considered white. These women are in demand in the repro tech business and can earn relatively much money there. Nevertheless, they come from European countries with which Western and Northern Europe maintain a neocolonial relationship (Nahman 2018).

Specifically, the women's eggs would be aspirated under anesthetic in a clinic and fertilized with foreign sperm in the next room. So here too, the basis is new reproductive technologies. But new queer forms of kinship and family are not an issue for Dana, while we tear out the last of the red-orange chard. Rather, she speaks of "raw material labor" and "egg producers", emphasizing that

women do the work and that it is about labor. Dana thus emphasizes another aspect of the reproductive technology IVF. In order to produce the main actor of IVF – the laboratory embryo – postcolonial, feminised work is necessary, which includes the following aspects, among others: balancing multiple jobs and studies, good time management, strategically leaving out certain life details when women talk to relatives in countries of origin, a good diet, work out and fitness, traveling to the clinic, undergoing hormone stimulation, and living with risks such as hyperstimulation syndrome, a disease that can be fatal if ovaries enlarge or water accumulates in the abdomen.

Materialist feminists therefore address reproductive technologies as part of transnational reproductive economies and thus expand the debate about socialised women's work to include the question of these reproductive and biotechnologies. Accordingly, reproductive economies now go beyond places such as the home and activities such as cleaning, having sex or raising children and also take place in the fertility clinics and laboratories of a global world. According to the authors, it is not reproductive desires but capitalist accumulation demands that have been the main reasons for the fragmentation of the reproductive process (Cooper 2008, 129).

Dana's face glows. She herself has a ten-year-old daughter. She has long since separated from the father of her child. "Why do women like Dana have children with men like that?" asks Heiner tearfully from time to time. He thinks she's hot, even though Dana for him is too much sociologist structure and too little pop. My smartphone reports a text message, which elicits a disapproving tone from Dana: "Meet your loved ones – without cell phones, please! With all your senses!" Instead of looking to see who it is, I nod in Dana's direction, tired by her never ending directives. Dana goes on to lecture that the emergence of biotechnologies such as stem cell or cloning technologies means a new intensity in the capitalization of the body's interior. Raw material labor within the body is the basis for the production of added value in new biosectors such as stem cell and cloning research. These branches of research are dependent on vast quantities of egg cells. In public discourse, however, it is usually only the activity of researchers that is seen as creative work. In contrast to the work of egg cell producers, it is classified as socially valuable and the contribution of the raw material workers is concealed. It therefore *does* make a difference whether the reproductive potential travels from the test tube back into the body of the person from whom the egg cell originated. And whether the embryo becomes a child *there* – part of the person's 'own' identity. Or whether the reproductive power in the biosector is coupled with production machines and results in added value.

After four hours in the autumn sun, including sunburn, I announce that I want a tubi. She doesn't need anything like that, Dana replies. Nature is enough for her. It's enough for me though. I go to the composting toilet, try not to breathe and quickly read the text message. "I'm outside Berghain. I'll put you on the list. Come quickly! And have fun with me!!!", Hannah writes. Instead of having a boring discussion with Dana about age and clubbing, I tell Dana that a friend urgently needs a babysitter and I need a digital detox evening. Just for me. "That is great. Enjoy! See you soon."

New eugenics

In the guest list queue, I ask Hannah about smartphones. I need a new one. Hannah knows her stuff. Not only because she works for one of the world's largest smartphone companies, but also because Hannah is deaf. She only communicates with hearing people via her latest smartphone; she does not get enough out of lip-reading. Spitting fissures and bad breath are further problems. This quickly unsettles hearing people.

Once we have got through the smartphone theme, our typing speeds up on the subject of reproductive technologies. This time it is about preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). It has been fundamentally feasible in Germany since 2011 – similar to abortion, it is explicitly prohibited, but not illegal in exceptional cases. For PGD, some cells are removed from an IVF embryo and examined for so-called chromosomal defects. The deep-freezing of sperm and IVF have made PGD possible in the first place (Albrecht/Grüber 2019; Achtelik 2016).

PGD is an issue for Hannah and her partner Janine because they have at least discussed its possibility when conceiving their daughter Julie. Janine and Julie are also deaf. The couple do not see themselves as 'disabled', but as part of a "special language culture – German sign language", as Hannah says: "We have more in common with a Spanish-speaking woman than with someone in a wheel-chair". If they had been able to take advantage of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, they would actually have been more concerned with ensuring that their child was also deaf, i.e. part of their 'own culture'. (As self-determined as the use of new technologies can sometimes be, the shitstorm that an article in a US newspaper caused for a deaf couple with the same wish was just as great.) (Mundy 2002)

While we are standing there waiting, she asks me: "And you, why are you against PGD? Because it is supposed to prevent people like us and not multiply them?" I answer "Yes", think for a moment and then add: "Also. But mainly

for selfish reasons.” Like prenatal diagnosis (PND), PGD could ultimately enable individualized eugenics, thanks to which individuals are supposed to take population policy goals into their own hands (Achtelik 2015). If PND classifies her foetus as ‘disabled’, a pregnant person – at least under certain circumstances – must decide for or against an abortion. I think I am against such considerations, or even the beginnings of such considerations, because I never wanted to deal with them: I never wanted to have to deal with an ethics committee, never wanted to have a doctor select embryos, never wanted to have discussions with people close to me about the birth of a possibly ‘disabled’ child, never wanted to be placed in ‘risk’ groups or have to deal with statistical statements.

It also seems to me that the uproar caused by the news of the deaf couple wishing to have a deaf child shows that technologies have difficulties shedding their inscribed capitalist history of normalization. IVF with subsequent PGD has, one could argue, been developed to optimize industrial ‘breeding methods’. The aim is – among other things – to guarantee offspring that come as close as possible to the criteria of health in the sense of performance. These criteria, along with other norms, were at the beginning of the development and are therefore inscribed in today’s social field of possibilities in which individual decisions for or against the use of technology are made. The social drive that led to the spatial separation (Dana would say: “fragmentation”) of reproduction in the first place should be questioned much more closely. We then might not even have to engage with the epistemic assumptions that precede thinking about traveling with reproductive substances.

Hannah, on the other hand, argues that technologies ‘in themselves’ mean nothing. Like more recent feminist movements such as xeno-feminism and glitch feminism, she also assumes that every technology can be appropriated for one’s own feminist purpose. Technologies are initially value-neutral and can be used for good or bad depending on social norms, which can also be changed. And: “Just because racists dream of a future in which there are only white people without ‘disabilities’ does not mean that we use technology in the same way.” (Julie is also a Black baby.) As I’m about to answer, the bouncer waves us through.

After care

In the days that follow, images, intensities and snippets of conversation from the weekend flash through my mind again and again. Dana’s governess-like manner, her indifference to queer worlds and her idealizations of a life far removed from technology – they deeply annoy me. But Hannah and Louisa’s Elon

Musk-ish techno-optimism of the high and very high earners is also too one-dimensional, too local, too small for me, lacking in solidarity. Nevertheless, can the positions perhaps be read together?

A queer-materialist reproductive politics would then go beyond the mere celebration of 'great new family and kinship relations' through reproductive technologies and would ask who works for whose parenthood desires in terms of raw materials, whose bodies are particularly sought after in transnational bio-economies and who is excluded. Then, for example, it would become clear that over the last two decades, eggs from lesbian women have also become a valuable reproductive substance. According to fertility centers, the success rates with 'lesbian' eggs in IVF are significantly higher than those with eggs from heterosexual women (Goodchild 2009). (Lesbians use reproductive technologies because they want to avoid heterosexuality in the first place. Problems getting pregnant 'naturally' are not the main reason for their use. A London fertility clinic writes on its homepage: "Most lesbian women seeking fertility treatment are not infertile. So, their chances of success are good.") (London Women's Clinic 2021)

On the clinic's website, egg sharing or shared motherhood is advertised as a model that is particularly popular with lesbian women. And a researcher at the clinic says: "It's also a remarkable turnaround – 10 years ago lesbian women weren't all that welcome in fertility clinics. Now that's changed. These women are going to be our saviours". (London Women's Clinic 2021) This proves that they make excellent patients in egg-sharing schemes – both as donors and recipients. The employee of a counseling center for queers who want to have children also reported something similar after one of my lectures. The advice center is located on the border with the technologically liberal Netherlands, so reproductive clinics from the neighboring country regularly contacted them to display flyers and be present on their website to recruit new customers and donors. When it comes to new technologies, lesbian and single women have become courted reproductive subjects.

Does this also make them preferred raw material workers? And what about men with a female-to-male match? They too have no infertility problems in the first place, while conventional cis hetero sex has no significance for their reproduction. Will they also soon be discovered by researchers as raw material subjects? Or do they, because they are men, tend to reject commodity work and leave it to their partners? Does commodity work have an effect on the relationship between differently privileged (and less privileged) gendered modes of existence? Between cis women (and men), femmes who are empathetic towards

trans* people, trans* women, gays, lesbians and 'gay heteros' like Heiner and so on? Is there a danger (and would it only be a danger?) that lesbian women are doing commodity work for gay men, straight women and couples because their eggs are considered by researchers to be of better quality?

Finally, how do we deal with this politically? 'Queer' continues to denote a precarious social position, at least in some circumstances. Queers are one of the most discussed and at the same time most restricted groups when it comes to access to reproductive technologies and reproductive health. Nevertheless, money, for example, helps to circumvent these restrictions, and with future economies such as stem cell research, new areas of society are emerging in which added value is created. If queers are indeed increasingly addressed as commodity workers, should queer unions be formed to guarantee their rights? Would a transnational queer authority need to be created to restrict wealthier gay men from claiming the bodies and substances of vulnerable, poorer groups? Or would such a political practice merely ethically and institutionally secure, or even obfuscate, the exploitation of queer reproductive substances? After all, the capitalist history of trade unions and bioethics commissions is full of chilling examples.

Finally, if we add a third perspective that (not only) enables Hannah, a queer appropriation policy would also have to include the rejection of trans*phobic practices and the commitment to implanting embryos classified as intersex. It would also circumvent so-called *family balancing* – the creation of a 'gender-balanced' family. Finally, an intersectionally informed queer appropriation policy would have to advocate that embryos classified as 'disabled' are also carried to term and that PGD no longer remains a *whitening* technology, that is, one that prefers to make *White* babies and discards black embryos/fetuses (Smietana/Thompson/Winddance Twine, 2018: 10). This queer appropriation policy would therefore actually show solidarity with couples like Hannah and Janine, even setting them up as role models and no longer excluding people with 'disabilities' as sperm or egg donors.

Such scenarios seem remote to me, as feminists are outraged when it comes to 'sex selection', but eugenic practices are often euphemistically regarded (by able-bodied/non-'disabled' people) as 'medically necessary' (Rajani 2009), and the issue of racism is still a blank space in the German anti-eugenics and 'disabled' movements. "Why a black baby too? Narcissistic exoticism!" Hannah and Janine have heard a lot of things. Of course they would have to deal with their own racism and parental whiteness again and again. Nevertheless, they both know for themselves that as deaf and lesbian they have always been a public

couple – a couple who is aware of the daily discriminations caused by visibility regimes (or those of audibility), but above all a couple who has a large stock of coping strategies that they will pass on to their child.

I also have to think back to the conversation with Louisa. After a few tubis, she had said that conception had never been something 'natural'. The new reproductive technologies were just another method in a whole repertoire of reproductive techniques: queers had always asked cis-male friends for sperm in order to mix the sperm cocktail and wind up the roasting syringe. And Hannah had also emphasised later during the dance that she and Janine were among the vanishingly small number of people to whom non-'disabled' European ethnologists refer when they wanted to argue through the 'progressive appropriation' of technologies. However, it should be about solidarity with the over-whelming majority of people with (and without) 'disabilities' who would like to have children but are unable to do so due to discrimination. To stay with the last example: Poverty, a life in special institutions without privacy and intimacy or the lack of the right to 'parental assistance' – these are the real hurdles for people with disabilities (Achtelik 2015).

So we agree on one thing: a scenario in which it really doesn't matter how many children and which children we have, but also who has these children – technologies are not absolutely necessary for this. In order to fight for just, intersectional and queer reproductive *insignificance*, however, it is essential to take a look at – and ultimately change – the current global social gender relations and divisions of labour that cause some to go on reproductive strike and exclude others from reproduction.

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