

New technologies of re/production and a world beyond the family: Tlotlo Tsamaase's *Womb City*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the contemporary debate surrounding reproductive politics by analysing Tlotlo Tsamaase's debut novel, *Womb City* (2024), a work that exemplifies the critical intersection of feminist philosophy and feminist science fiction. Using Shulamith Firestone's essay *The Dialectic of Sex* and Marge Piercy's critical utopia *Woman on the Edge of Time* as starting points, this article intends to enter the debate about the necessity of redefining family structures beyond traditional genealogical or biological ties. *Womb City* is set in a futuristic Botswana, where AI-controlled and human-monitored artificial wombs seem to give women freedom from pregnancy and gender roles in these futuristic surveillance states, however, bodies are a government-issued resource. Our reading of Tsamaase's novel centers on the portrayal of family as an instrument of oppression, exploring the author's critiques as possible foundations for envisioning alternatives beyond the nuclear, white, heterocispatriarchal family (Lewis 2019, 2022; Gumbs, Martens, Williams 2016). Furthermore, Tsamaase's portrayal of reproductive technologies is examined alongside Angela Balzano's recent works, which do not reject biotechnologies themselves but critically interrogate the social norms that shape their use.

Keywords

Tlotlo Tsamaase, reproductive technologies, family abolitionism, africanfuturism, intersectionality

Framing the contemporary debate on reproductive technologies

"It is a wonder we let fetuses inside us," writes Sophie Lewis in the opening of her book *Full Surrogacy Now* (2019, 1), referring to the hundreds of thousands of human deaths that occur every year due to pregnancy. Lewis contends that this occurs primarily due to political and economic motivations, rather than being an inherent or inevitable aspect of our reality. She draws on works like Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* (1987-1989), Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), but she emphasises the essential role of Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) in envisioning and articulating "postcapitalist, postgender (and apparently postracial) futures in which procreation would mostly be accomplished outside of human bodies" (Lewis 2019, 33). The publication years of many cited works highlight the 1970s

as a pivotal moment in discussions surrounding reproductive technologies, offering essential insights that feminist theorists like Sophie Lewis still engage with in contemporary discourse.

The proposals presented in these texts were highly controversial at the time of their publication, often regarded as excessively radical and futuristic, leading to their dismissal. Consequently, many of these discussions were overshadowed and went largely unnoticed for an extended period. Recently, however, a new generation of authors – both feminist philosophers and speculative fiction writers – has revived these ideas, reexamining their theories and debates within a contemporary context. Their insights remain not only revolutionary but also deeply relevant today. This resurgence is especially significant as the struggles over reproductive politics continue to be central to governmental policies in many countries, which, just as before, place women's bodies – and their wombs in particular – under scrutiny.

A striking example occurred in Italy on October 16, 2024, when the parliament made it illegal for couples to have children through surrogacy (Gestational Surrogacy Agreements – GPA) abroad. While surrogacy has been illegal in the country since 2004 (Law 40 of 2004, article 12, paragraph 6), it will now be prosecuted even if practiced in countries like the United States and Canada, with penalties of up to two years imprisonment and fines of up to €1 million. The law, which passed by 84 votes to 58 in Italy's Senate and came into effect immediately, is part of the socially conservative agenda of Giorgia Meloni's ruling far-right Fratelli d'Italia party, and of a broader attack against the LGBTQIA+ community in Italy. This attack is also supported by those feminist movements that make prescriptions and prohibitions their rallying cries, sidestepping open debate and endorsing bans and punitive sanctions aligned with a conservative vision that upholds a singular model of family (Siviero 2024).

Meanwhile, outside the national context where the two authors of this article are currently situated, far-right political parties are targeting international surrogacy for criminal sanctions, attempting to erase same-sex parent families under the guise of defending women's autonomy. As we write these lines, we have just witnessed a U.S. presidential election that is likely to have a substantial impact on reproductive health and rights worldwide. Debates around reproductive rights have indeed taken center stage in American politics, following landmark events like the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 and the implementation of some of the most restricting policies on global reproductive health during Trump's presidency through the *Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance* (PLGHA) policy.¹ Kamala Harris, on the other hand, had included reproductive freedom as one of the cornerstones of her electoral platform, labelling bans on abortion as “arcane and immoral,”² and framing issues as IVF (in vitro fertilization) access and affordable child care as interconnected rights. The outcome of this polarization between “protecting life” and “reproductive freedom” will significantly impact

reproductive equity and justice for communities worldwide (see Sherman 2024 and Qayyum 2024).

As noted, feminist movements have adopted a diverse range of often conflicting perspectives on reproductive technologies and their significant impact on the (re)construction of individual, family, and group identities. This article intends to trace the roots and grasp the current trajectories of this timely, heated, and urgent debate about the possibilities – and contradictions – of reproduction beyond the body, a theme that has been part of our cultural imagination for centuries. It will do so by looking at the representation of motherhood and family structures beyond biological constraints in contemporary feminist philosophy and feminist speculative fiction. Specifically, the latter can transport us elsewhere and elsewhen, enabling us to envision how reproductive technologies can push the boundaries of what it means to be human and liberate reproduction from the confines of the heterosexual nuclear family.

The article will then contribute to the contemporary debate about the necessity of redefining families – not merely as entities tied by genealogy or biological bonds – through a reading of Motswana africanfuturist author Tlotlo Tsamaase’s recent debut novel, *Womb City* (2024). The text is set in a futuristic Botswana, where AI-controlled and human-monitored artificial wombs seem to give women freedom from pregnancy and gender roles; in these futuristic surveillance states, however, bodies are a government-issued resource. In broadening the discussion of reproductive rights beyond the Italian and the US contexts, it is essential to consider the unique socio-political dynamics in Botswana, where *Womb City* is set. In Botswana, abortion is legally permitted under specific circumstances, such as in cases of rape, incest, risk to the woman’s health, or severe fetal impairment. However, knowledge of abortion law remains limited across communities, including among healthcare providers, law enforcement, and local leaders, with many assuming abortion is entirely illegal. The lack of clear procedural guidelines on implementing abortion laws further complicates access to safe and legal abortions, negatively affecting those seeking care (Rakereng et al. 2024). As for assisted reproductive technologies, access remains constrained by factors such as high costs, limited availability of specialised centers, and socio-cultural perceptions. A study on access to assisted reproductive technologies across sub-Saharan Africa, including Botswana, highlights that clinical providers often disagree on the best approaches to improve accessibility, indicating a need for standardised, affordable infertility treatments (Whittaker et al. 2024). Situating Tsamasee’s work within this context not only illuminates the specific cultural and historical pressures women face in Botswana but also avoids replicating colonial hierarchies of knowledge and situates the critique presented in *Womb City* within wider textual and geo-political networks.

Whilst Piercy’s novel was able to question parenthood and family structures but also imagine alter-families and alter-communities and has therefore been defined a “utopia of the

family” (Bartkowsky 1989), Tsamaase’s text is a dystopian narrative where the family itself becomes a key terrain of conflict and thriving inequality. *Womb City* will be read here in dialogue with some of the most recent critical contributions regarding family abolitionist demands, new technologies of reproduction, and environmental concerns (Lewis 2019, 2022; Balzano 2021, 2024). The reading of Tsamaase’s novel will focus on the representation of family as an oppressive tool, investigating whether such critique can help us to imagine what lurks beyond the family’s horizons and whether the abolition of the nuclear family can be read as a decolonial imperative (Gumbs, Martens, Williams 2016; Lewis 2019, 2022). Moreover, Tsamaase’s representation of reproductive technologies will be analysed in dialogue with Angela Balzano’s latest books, which do not reject biotechnologies themselves but critically interrogate the social norms that shape their use. Locating our analysis at the intersections of gender, ‘race’, class and ability, we will investigate whether the application of technosciences in *Womb City* aims to turn human lives into disposable commodities or whether it seeks to pursue a new utopia of reproduction.

A look into the origins of the debate

In 1976, Marge Piercy described the utopian project represented in *Woman on the Edge of Time* as a new world where the mother is not a biological entity but rather a machine capable of creating children in a large aquarium, thereby eliminating the physical connection between mothers and children during gestation and freeing reproduction from the direct correlation between motherhood and the biologically female body.³ In the community of Mattapoissett, traditional family structures are abolished, and each child is cared for by three co-mothers (regardless of gender – since the novel frequently omits or deconstructs the gender connotations of its characters, particularly through the lens of one protagonist who clearly identifies as non-binary). Alongside the entire community, these co-mothers collectively share the responsibility of nurturing and raising the newborns. This model embodies a deeper commitment to collective solidarity, care, and education, moving away from individual parental roles associated with the traditional heterosexual nuclear family structure:

It was part of women’s long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we’d never be equal. And males would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break all the nuclear bonding. (Piercy 1976, 105)

Just a few years earlier, in 1970, Shulamith Firestone put forth a similar solution in her essay *The Dialectic of Sex*, suggesting that the key to eradicating gender-based inequality lies in using technology to take control of the reproductive process. She argued that by doing so,

women could regain full control over their bodies, dismantling the traditional nuclear family and its role in perpetuating gender oppression. The debate flourished for a few years, generating significant controversy within both the feminist movement and the conservatives, and sparking fervent discussions. This arose from the radical nature of Firestone's arguments, which primarily attributed inequalities to biological factors. She emphasized that placing the burden of reproduction solely on women's bodies hindered the ability to overcome these disparities, as women were tasked with the challenges of gestation and childbirth while also carrying the primary responsibility for caregiving. Firestone's proposal to eradicate these inequalities through advancements in biology and control over reproductive technologies also addressed cultural and psychological factors. In this regard, she foreshadowed theories like those of Judith Butler by arguing that if society pursued the utopian vision she proposed, genital and biological differences would lose their social significance (Merck and Sandford 2010). However, the debate gradually receded from the spotlight, largely due to Firestone's withdrawal from the public sphere shortly after the publication of her book. As argued by Victoria Margree:

One consequence of Firestone's withdrawal was that the *Dialectic* was thus in a sense orphaned, cast out upon the world to fend for itself without the guardianship of an author who would defend it against misunderstandings, correct or revise its arguments as feminist theory evolved over the years. (2018, 11)

Other publications, such as the essay collection *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex*, have recently endeavored to rediscover Firestone's contributions. They critically reflect on her past and future impacts while exploring how her ideas remain relevant to contemporary issues (Merk and Sandford 2010). Similarly, the Italian philosopher Angela Balzano examines Piercy's portrayal of Firestone's ideas in *Per farla finita con la famiglia* ("Doing Away with Family," 2021), highlighting the vital role of science fiction and utopian thinking in reimagining reproductive politics. In her analysis, she states:

Do you remember Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*? It's the science fiction novel we used against the essentialist construction of motherhood, the one that first helped us understand that reproductive labor needs to be redistributed so that no gender, race, or species is relegated to performing it for free. Remember Mattapoissett? [...] They revolutionised the reproductive system by practicing multispecies justice. And if you call it feminist science fiction to dismiss it, you'll be mistaken. Feminist science fiction is philosophy, and like the best philosophy, it is charged with subversive potential, a condensed form of epistemologies rooted in the flesh, of aesthetics of existence, and ethics grounded in materiality: a serious, and equally fabulous, political project.⁴ (Balzano 2021, 141, 175)

Building on the link between Firestone's theories and Piercy's narratives as a guiding framework, we now shift focus to explore how many of the previously discussed themes emerge in new forms within Tlotlo Tsamaase's novel *Womb City* and in contemporary feminist philosophies on the topic.

Family abolitionism and bonds beyond blood ties

Tlotlo Tsamaase's debut novel *Womb City* (2024) aligns closely with this tradition and ideas. The book can be described as a critical dystopia⁵ with body horror and africanfuturist nuances. *Womb City* is set in a dystopian, near-future Gaborone, where body-swapping technology intersects with reflections on patriarchal societal structures, privilege, and systemic oppression. In this future society, individuals can upload their consciousness into new bodies through a system called "body-hopping," although its positive potential is hindered by ongoing controversies related to surveillance distortions, corruption, and discrimination by the government and those who regulate these technologies. Within the Botswanan context of the novel, the practice of body-hopping traces back to the sacred pools of Matsieng, a primordial deity whom Tsamaase portrays as a non-binary god; this way, the author intertwines cyberpunk science fiction with various cultural and religious beliefs from Botswana, exploring the concept of a digital afterlife and how it clashes with traditional notions of reincarnation.⁶

The society depicted is centered around heteronormative patriarchy and privilege. Nelah, the protagonist and the internal focaliser of the whole story, is a Black woman trapped in a criminalized body, constantly monitored by the government and her abusive husband Elifasi, who works as a police officer. Nelah is having a secret affair with a wealthy engineer named Janith Koshal, she is an architect, and lives under growing social pressure that encourages her to become a mother and build a stable family life. However, her life spirals into chaos when, together with her lover, she accidentally kills a woman named Moremi, setting off a chain of events that brings upon her both the vengeful spirit of the victim and that of the corrupt political system, which she will confront by offering readers a perspective on how to exploit the cracks in the system, build alliances capable of destroying it, and imagine a new one.

Unable to conceive a child, Nelah and Elifasi turn to a Wombcubator, an external uterus that can grow a baby to full-term.⁷ The technology presented in the novel not only eradicates diseases and disabilities but also enables parents to 'edit' their children, customising them to align with specific preferences – even down to choosing between sons and daughters.⁸ The portrayal of family bonds in the novel is deliberately ambiguous, especially in relation to the reproductive system and body-hopping. This practice allows souls to move from an old body to a new one, with the government exercising control through microchips implanted in each person. If someone commits a crime, the government can remove their soul, assign the body to a new soul, and erase the previous memories. This practice results in the individual becoming part of a new family without establishing authentic emotional connections with its members. Even though the body remains the same, the soul and the person within it change, leading to a complex reconstruction of relationships. Within this framework, one might expect the setting to facilitate a reconfiguration of the nuclear family concept. However, Tsamaase's future is profoundly individualistic; it is a world so cruel and surveilled that the protagonists are

unable to trust anyone and must struggle to survive on their own. The layer of survival is, as always, poignantly crucial for female characters, whose lives are perpetually in danger and who face even greater control by the state. Nelah is not only monitored by a government-implanted microchip but also faces surveillance from her husband, Elifasi, who acts as a kind of state emissary within their home. Here, AI assessments are unsettlingly intertwined with sexual acts intended to ‘purify’ her:

He inserts it the same way he uses his penis: mechanically, thoughtlessly. [...] Every morning, I have an AI assessment where my husband peruses my memory files. ‘That’s why I married you – to keep you in line’, he’d shoot off, laughing at his own joke. [...] I stare at him and wonder if every marriage is like ours: microchipped wives watching our husbands disembowel our thoughts and memories, dissecting our every infraction, interrogating us about our glances, our clothes, our conversations. [...] We’re not only losing the power of our bodies, we’re losing the privacy our minds [sic]. [...] These intimate sessions mutilate my sense of independence; in this murdered church of my body, every molecule is a screaming prisoner. [...] After this, like always, we have sex. Pump, pump. Tap out in four strokes. Cum. Done. Unsatisfactory. My body’s sexually frustrated. Elifasi stands, shakes himself out. ‘Finished. So far, you’re pure’. Mxm, bastard. As if it’s his dick that purifies me. (Tsamaase 2024, 8)

The portrayal of violence within the family setting, combined with the author’s exploration of whether all marriages inherently involve control and surveillance, strongly resonates with Sophie Lewis’s reflections in *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (2022), where she states that nobody is more likely to harm you than your family: “the family is where most of the rape happens on this earth, and most of the murder. No one is likelier to rob, bully, blackmail, manipulate, or hit you, or inflict unwanted touch, than family” (2022, 9); the monster, in other words, is always “coming from inside the house” (2022, 17). Rephrasing *Anna Karenina*’s well-known incipit, Lewis suggests that unhappy families are all alike, “because the family is a miserable way to organize care – whereas happy ones are miraculous anomalies” (Lewis 2022, 11). Even so-called happy families function as capitalism’s base unit, a microcosm of the nation-state, and an image of hierarchy-within-unity; even in happy families, she claims, the unpaid and unacknowledged work needed to raise children and care for each other is endless and exhausting. The family’s function is to “replace welfare” (Lewis 2022, 7) through the “privatization of that which should be common” (Lewis 2022, 9), so that the task of looking after children is kept inside the family instead of being collectively shared. Tracing the story of family abolitionism from Charles Fourier to Shulamith Firestone, Sophie Lewis’ utopian and unapologetically revolutionary manifesto attempts to imagine what might come after the family, seeking better ways of loving, caring, and living. Lewis’ book resonates within Tsamaase’s representation and critique of family structures through the perspective of the protagonist, who, after having gone through the body-hopping practice, becomes part of the family of the original inhabitant of the body, a family that accepts her only out of love for their previous daughter. Nelah is well-aware that her family has never created strong biological ties with her and is therefore unable to understand her. A feeling of “loss, loneliness, and family

fractures” (Tsamaase 2024, 19) comes with body-hopping, and the government is wary that a “fractured family creates a fractured society, which creates a destroyed nation” (Tsamaase 2024, 19). Nelah sees the subversive potential of this complex reconstruction of relationships beyond biological ties but comes up against her family’s incapacity to love her back. Her attempt to start her own loving and caring family with Elifasi quickly fades as soon as he starts monitoring her: “disappointment at me for thinking married life would be perfect and full of unconditional love” (Tsamaase 2024, 25).

Forms of oppression and inequality also resurface in the context of pregnancy. When the couple struggles to conceive naturally, the blame falls entirely on Nelah, unable to carry her husband’s seeds: “How can I be free when my womb is a grave, killing any new life that tries to form, any seeds that my husband plants in it?” (Tsamaase 2024, 13-14). The protagonist is unable to carry pregnancies to term, and despite three previous attempts at IVF, her body seems unable to accommodate new lives. The author subtly suggests a series of reasons for this, notably the fact that the body into which her soul has been transferred has already hosted two previous occupants. It is a weakened body, having lost an arm in the past for reasons that the family chooses not to disclose. Although burdened by its criminal past and disability, this body also carries with it significant difficulties in procreation. The protagonist is blamed by her husband, who accuses her of being unable to conceive naturally: “Didn’t you find it strange he wasn’t kicking? For three fucking days. Jesus Christ, you killed my son” (Tsamaase 2024, 5). She also faces judgment from society, which labels her a “Black Womb,” and from the family to which her soul has been assigned after body-hopping. Her mother questions how she can love a child if she is unable to carry and give birth to it with her own body, and her brother insists that she “is a man under that skin. It’s all unnatural” (Tsamaase 2024, 18). The brother’s comment invites reflection on an aspect of the novel that, although only subtly explored within the plot, underscores the neutrality of the soul. This neutrality is transferred into binary bodies, which do not necessarily reflect the experiences associated with the gender the soul had in its previous lives. At the same time, the protagonist’s struggle with motherhood prompts those around her to question her identity as a woman, directly linking maternal and parental instincts to femininity, while the absence of these traits is seen as a masculine characteristic. This dynamic emphasises the complexity of the novel’s exploration of gender, particularly in a world where the insistence on a binary gender system seems increasingly absurd, given the fluid relationship between souls and the bodies they inhabit, which are constantly changing. As the protagonist reflects in this passage:

So what if I was a man before I got transplanted into this body? Is it really that bad? And aren’t souls genderless? So I groomed myself to accept this traditional role because I was retrofitted for it. I kept quiet and pretended to love this womanhood that was not mine to wear, that only fit too tightly, leaving me breathless. (Tsamaase 2024, 27)

The protagonist's womb is referred to in the novel as the "Black Womb," a term that carries multiple layers of meaning, intertwining implications of infertility, blame, and racial connotation. Other terms used by the author include "minefield" (Tsamaase 2024, 23) and "grave" (Tsamaase 2024, 13-14). In addition to the earlier reflections on the relationship between parental instincts, reproductive obligations, and gender, some of the themes within the novel can be analysed through the lens of the connection between blackness and reproductive politics, as the novel explores Nelah's awareness of the limitations the child will face in terms of oppression and opportunities. This theme echoes existing scholarship on the subject, such as the foundational works of Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman on the transmission of slavery through the maternal line (Spillers 1987; Hartman 2016).⁹ Hartman, in *The Belly of the World*, explores in particular the complex configuration of gender relations during slavery, analysing its legacy in the context of the system's afterlife and global capitalism. The author discusses the maternal role of reproduction and care in these terms:

Those of us who have been "touched by the mother" need acknowledge that her ability to provide care, food, and refuge often has placed her in great jeopardy and, above all, required her to give with no expectation of reciprocity or return. *All we have is what she holds in her outstretched hands*. There is no getting around this. (Hartman 2016, 171)

It should be stressed, however, that both Spillers and Hartman address African-American concerns, whereas Tsamaase emerges as a prominent figure whose work distinctly aligns with the principles of africanfuturism. As Kimberly Cleveland observes in her recent *Africanfuturism: African Imaginings of Other Times, Spaces, and Worlds* (2024), africanfuturism is "specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view" (Cleveland 2024, 8), subsequently expanding into the Black Diaspora while deliberately avoiding the privileging of Western perspectives. By contrast, Afrofuturism generally emphasizes Western viewpoints and relies on US-based frameworks in its discourse. Cleveland further emphasizes that although africanfuturism and Afrofuturism share commonalities, they remain "distinguishable from, albeit unquestionably related to" one another (Cleveland 2024, 2), both contributing to the growing archive of narratives wherein the African world as a collective imagination is situated at the intersection of "a 'preferred future' and 'becoming present'," as Kodwo Eshun posits in his critical work on Afrofuturism. Tsamaase's distinctive approach to world-building, using indigenous mythological elements such as the ancient deity Matsieng, reflects the unique characteristics of africanfuturism. Simultaneously, Tsamaase's work is widely circulated in US-based venues, including science fiction magazines such as *Clarkesworld*, *Terraform*, *Apex Magazine*, and *Strange Horizons*, with *Womb City* published under Erewhon Books, a US-based imprint of Kensington Books. This dual engagement places Tsamaase at the intersection of africanfuturist thought and a global literary market, expanding the relevance of her work and allowing her to explore themes of reproductive politics on a

broader scale, particularly by presenting reflections on the African afterlife of slavery that extend beyond Botswana's borders.

The novel effectively highlights historically entrenched racist views that continue to shape the representation of the black mother in the contemporary world. This is particularly evident considering recent developments in the debate surrounding the reproduction of social death through an Afropessimist framework, which can be understood through the repeated use of the term "Black Womb" in the novel, that can be linked to the idea that: "Black women's wombs are thus not only factories of abjection but, I argue, death machines: reproducing those oriented toward social death and a negligible physical death" (Mendes 2020, 62). In this sense, the representation of the protagonist's womb as a grave, along with the repeated references to her body as a "black womb," can, on the one hand, refer to her actual reproductive incapacity and the mechanisms of blame surrounding her gender identity. On the other hand, it can point to reflections on the relationship between motherhood, gender inequalities, and blackness that emerge throughout the novel, especially when considering the protagonist's concerns about the multiple layers of oppression she is forced to endure:

I can only imagine before that as a Black woman, one was oppressed thrice: that they are not white, a man, and worse, they are Black, and add to that the layer of disability, being the third owner of a body that was so young, since the value of a body goes down if it has endured a few consciousness transplants. (Tsamaase 2024, 27)

Despite all these dystopian elements reflecting on black motherhood, the author also introduces utopian impulses and potential reimaginations of motherhood and family that take the path of fugitivity, stressing the idea that "this care, which is coerced and freely given" constitutes the heart of the black "social poesis, of making and relation" (Hartman 2016, 171); this idea will be further examined later in the article.

Utopian and dystopian reproductive technologies

Turning to the portrayal of reproductive politics, the novel powerfully illustrates how, in the dystopian society of *Womb City*, the biological division of labour in reproduction remains a central mechanism of male domination. Nelah persuades herself that "[her] body is made to just have sex without leading to procreation, like [she's] being punished for being successful in other areas of [her] life" (Tsamaase 2024, 16). While women have to choose between a career and raising children, men's promotion appears to be impacted in a positive way by their female partners' pregnancies: speaking of Nelah's husband Elifasi, her brother claims:

No surprise that the poor man's still stuck in the same position while his male colleagues are earning promotions just as much as their wives are churning out babies. No one promotes a man without a

family. I'm surprised he's stuck around this long. Probably wise to do so since a divorce may tarnish his image more than being childless. (Tsamaase 2024, 19)

The novel presents pregnancy exclusively as a female burden while simultaneously framing it as something that elevates the patriarch's supposed prestige – even as he assumes no actual responsibility. In this context, reproductive technologies emerge as tools of liberation, offering the potential to free women from childbirth and dismantle the patriarchal nuclear family structure. The protagonist effectively conveys this idea when she admits her relief at not having to give birth with her own body, stating:

I must confide in myself that I am relieved I don't have to carry my children; it removes my fears of pregnancy and childbirth. I used to find it strange when some of my girlfriends looked forward to being pregnant several times. I can't believe I thought it obligatory just because I had a womb and never once interrogated that yes, I had the power to say, "No, I'm not interested in carrying a baby to term." (Tsamaase 2024, 28)

Angela Balzano approaches these themes from a very similar perspective in her book *Per farla finita con la famiglia*, stating that although she has a womb, she has no interest in using it (Balzano 2021, 105), and exploring feminist technologies of reproduction reminiscent of those envisioned in the novel. Her proposal for re/productive degrowth and posthuman trans-species kinship moves from Donna Haraway's slogan "Make Kin Not Babies" (2016) to reimagine kinship by focusing on outsourced parenting and migrating minors travelling alone. Balzano's slogan "closed legs, open harbors" (Balzano 2021, 105, our translation) rephrases Paul Preciado's uterus strike declaration of 2014 – where he "close[s his] legs to National-Catholicism" and "invite[s] all bodies to put their uterus on strike" (Preciado 2014, n.p.) – and reclaims a vulvar autonomous space of pleasure and dysfunctionality, while celebrating non-nuclear reproductive choices. This resonates with Lewis's *Full Surrogacy Now*, where she states: "if feminists want to denaturalize the gender of reproductive work more generally, we have to stop (re-)imposing gender on gestation and gestators in particular" (Lewis 2019, 30). According to Balzano, reproductive technologies – and, specifically, a scenario where ectogenesis replaces surrogacy cycles – could free women from the 'tyranny of biology', overturn gender roles, and help us to untie reproduction from the heterosexual nuclear family. Ectogenesis, a term used to describe technology that enables a foetus to be gestated outside the human body in an artificial incubator, is already technically feasible. Trials have been performed on animals, with researchers of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia reporting success in gestating lamb foetuses in a closed fluid circuit known as the 'Biobag' (Partridge et al. 2017). Artificial womb technologies leading to full ectogenesis may be many decades away but could someday be a reality and change given notions of parenthood (Balzano 2021; Wilkinson et al. 2023; Tripaldi 2024): while surrogacy has already challenged traditional notions of motherhood, artificial wombs could disrupt reproductive norms in more profound ways.

Complete ectogenesis could in fact emancipate women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology, as the burden of carrying a pregnancy to term would no longer fall to those assigned female at birth. Drawing on Kendal (2015), who questions why the risks associated with reproduction should fall solely on women's shoulders, Balzano claims that ectogenesis could free women from the economic, social, and physical sacrifices of pregnancy – let alone the risks to their bodily autonomy. As ectogenesis develops further, it could offer equal starting points for people of all sexes and genders – and particularly for queer people, allowing reproduction outside the heterosexual nuclear family. Drawing from Firestone and Piercy, moreover, Balzano suggests that artificial reproduction is far from being inherently dehumanizing. To those who argue that ectogenesis dehumanizes parenthood, Piercy responds: “You think because we do not bear live [sic], we cannot love our children. [...] But we do, with whole hearts” (Piercy 1976, 133). Similarly, in *Womb City*, Nelah is forced to confront the societal expectation that refusing to give birth through her own body means being selfish, cold, and incapable of loving a child (Tsamaase 2024, 28).

However, both Piercy and Tsamaase highlight the potential positive and negative controversies surrounding these technologies. *Womb City* shows that if such tools are controlled by forces of patriarchy, racism, ableism, and heteronormativity, they could lead to even worse consequences than those we currently face in daily life. As suggested by Balzano, the biobag may long remain inaccessible for many, and Catholic bioethicists and pro-life scientists might even find common ground in using ectogenesis to carry to term pregnancies that we choose to terminate, complicating and threatening abortion ethics (Balzano 2021, 61–62). The subversive potential of reproductive technologies, Balzano claims, is limited by heteronormativity and confined within the realm of the white male and his desire to reproduce himself (Balzano 2021, 64). Tsamaase vividly illustrates this in her book, depicting a society where pregnancy is controlled by a discriminatory system for editing newborns, while the body-hopping system operates under a similar oppressive logic:

The waiting list system adopted by the Body Hope Facility is supposed to treat each consciousness equally and fairly. Still, news reports declare that they can trace our original identity, and based on who we were, their algorithm decides what bodies we get, which dictates who lives in privilege and who doesn't. Regardless of how you hide yourself from other people around you, the system will know if you are bisexual, lesbian, gay, trans, Black, Asian, or whatever minority. I find it aggravating that a soul's first identity is tethered to it regardless of who it becomes in the next lifespan, and whatever oppression its identity carried, it will enslave it into another oppressed body. That to escape this cycle one has to game the system or earn an upgrade; to consider a change in gender or ethnicity an upgrade is ludicrous, for it is only the materialism of this flesh and the laws of this world that muddy the true calibre of our souls. (Tsamaase 2024, 49–50)

In this way, the reproductive technologies depicted in this fictional universe establish a system of discrimination that is fuelled by heteronormative, cis patriarchal, ableist and racist violence.¹⁰ Body-hopping is indeed used to counter racial discrimination in the context of nationality,

citizenship, and immigration, and although the novel does not clearly define the geopolitics and racial composition of *Womb City*'s world, it unmistakably portrays a society where racist dynamics persist. One of Nelah's friend has attempted body-hopping "into a South African identity for three years to gain citizenship" (Tsamaase 2024, 65), while another one has "worked on her application for ten years to body-hop to a female British white body – *which is much easier than that of a white male*" (Tsamaase 2024, 65, emphasis added); the luckiest ones can win the lottery body-hop visas that are issued annually. In this regard, body-hopping might seem a liberating technology, helping people navigate identities that free them from constantly encountering barriers; the complicity of this technology with the racialisation of citizenship, however, soon becomes evident. To those asking why not just get residency rather than a body-hop visa, the novel responds that "you are treated for how you look regardless of what anyone says" (Tsamaase 2024, 67). In other words, "patriarchy is just like racism, a glutton for power it won't share, for sharing power means loss of power to them, a form of weakness – if we give them space, where will we sit? What will we do? Who are we, then?" (Tsamaase 2024, 204).

A similar critique is directed at biotechnologies' complicity with ableist discourse. On the one hand, the Wombcubator allows parents to fully edit their children, optimising their DNA to eliminate diseases and disabilities; on the other hand, body-hopping can augment "improper and malfunctioning bodies with bionic technologies to upgrade them to proper condition" (Tsamaase 2024, 47). As Nelah stresses, "disability rights organizations find that the real issues can't be fixed by tampering with our biology and replacing it with mechanical limbs. The world should be augmented to make it easier for us to assimilate rather than manipulating us to fit into it" (Tsamaase 2024, 48). When it comes to her body, having a bionic arm makes no difference to her: "the only issue I've had with this body is the microchip; that's the disability for me" (Tsamaase 2024, 47-48). To say it otherwise, the most pervasive system of oppression to overcome is that of technological surveillance. This idea echoes Angela Balzano's recent book *Eva Virale* ("Viral Eve," 2024), where the Italian philosopher discusses CRISPR-Cas9 – a technology that allows geneticists to edit genomes by altering, adding, or removing sections of DNA – and its potential to correct disease-causing gene mutations in viable human embryos. Balzano contends that access to such technology is, in itself, a privilege and reminds us that, in the meantime, countless people already born remain threatened by poverty, war, and exploitation (Balzano 2024, 123). All the more so if, as argued by Kelly Fritsch (2017), the disabilities we aim to eliminate with new technologies are actually caused by techno/biocapitalism and could have simply been prevented.

Escaping surveillance: towards futures of liberation

Similarly, surveillance technologies are depicted in the novel in a way that underscores their inherent controversies. This is evident in the protagonist's conflicted statements; despite enduring the tragic consequences of these systems throughout much of the narrative, she occasionally describes Botswana as a kind of utopia of peace, thanks to its extensive microchipping and surveillance system. At certain points, the narrative suggests that the sacrifice of personal privacy to the state is a trade-off worth making. As Nelah affirms: "We leave our doors unlocked. I can walk at night without looking over my shoulder. I can leave my drink unwatched without fearing that it might get spiked. We can leave our children unattended" (Tsamaase 2024, 97). However, the protagonist later begins to question the purpose of the microchip she is compelled to wear: "Is it really protecting me or monitoring me?" (Tsamaase 2024, -35). She adds, "'It has made our city safe'. My voice shakes. 'Safe for whom, exactly? The men who can now get away with everything?'" (Tsamaase 2024, 36). As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the world depicted in *Womb City* aligns far more with a dystopia of surveillance and violence than with the utopia of peace the protagonist occasionally describes.

Nelah is, in fact, caught in a trap orchestrated by the Murder Trials – the government agency responsible for monitoring murders and controlling bodies – with the complicity of both Elifasi and Janith, who, once again, find ways to build alliances with the system and perpetuate the discrimination of women's positions. During a wild night of drugs and excess with Janith, Nelah ends up killing a woman named Moremi. They hit her with their car, while they are intoxicated, and Janith convinces Nelah to bury her body and not call for help to prevent their affair from being exposed. The protagonist later discovers that Moremi, in a previous lifespan, was her daughter, and they both find themselves caught in a scenario that forces them to confront each other throughout much of the book. Moremi becomes a haunting presence, driven to destroy Nelah's family, while she is also tormented by the resurfacing memories of their past mother-daughter relationship. Her figure, described by various characters as a witch or ghost, embodies the deception inflicted by both the state and the men in the narrative against her and Nelah. Through their encounter, the potential for uncovering the hidden truths of the dystopian surveillance system that oppresses women in this world gradually emerges, revealing the betrayal by the government towards Matsieng and the intrusion of the Murder Trials into sacred mechanisms of cultural reincarnation. This leads the protagonists to draw a correlation between the male characters in the novel, their actions, and their continuity with the patriarchal system in power: all equally guilty of committing misogynistic violence against those subjectivities and bodies that fall outside the masculine, with Matsieng xemself included in this group of victims. The attempt at dialogue between Nelah and Moremi reveal in fact that their conditions may be more alike than the circumstances would suggest:

But how many of us women have been murdered, pitted against each other, our voices muzzled? [...] I feel everything. I see everything clearly. I feel Moremi's pain. But I'm exhausted of seeing different versions of me – slim, sexy, fat – lying plain, breasts opened, our vaginas as storages and hospices for silly paraphernalia, and being cut to pieces. [...] Because it's always the women who die, buried with their silences. But they have a story, a name, a soul, more than we could ever have. At least, I get to be reborn, wreak havoc, enact change. It is my power.

This is not where it ends. This is not how it ends.

We are reborn for a purpose, Moremi and I. Maybe, just maybe, I can change our situation. I have to do better. For my daughter. For Moremi. We don't just get to die and shut the fuck up. The world will feel our fury. Our bodies are wombs to bear murder. (Tsamaase 2024, 262)

The novel's conclusion reconfigures all power dynamics, beginning with a renewed alliance and a reimagining of the mother-daughter relationship between Nelah and Moremi. This redefined bond transcends the stereotypes and labels of "black womb" and "bad mother" that pervade the rest of the narrative. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes in the collection *Revolutionary Mothering*:

The radical potential of the word "mother" comes after the 'm'. It is the space that "other" takes in our mouths when we say it. We are something else. We know it from how fearfully institutions wield social norms and try to shut us down. We know it from how we are transforming the planet with our every messy step toward making life possible. Mamas who unlearn domination by refusing to dominate their children, extended family and friends, community caregivers, radical childcare collectives, all of us breaking cycles of abuse by deciding what we want to replicate from the past and what we need urgently to transform, are m/othering ourselves. (Gumbs, Martens, and Williams 2016, 21-22)

By rejecting the cycle of mutual violence between them, a dynamic encouraged by the system, the protagonists reveal a key to reimagining interpersonal relationships in the novel. This especially applies to mother-daughter bonds and queer family structures more broadly. From this, the possibility of change emerges – one that reimagines Tsamaase's world in a distinctly feminist and queer framework, free from violence and oppression. Grounded in the maternal – specifically a queer maternity finally liberated from stereotypes – this transformation proposes new rules for relating. The reconstruction of the relationship between Nelah and Moremi can thus be seen as the beginning of a community no longer built on individualism, competition, and suspicion, but on care, mutual solidarity, and trust in ancestral knowledge, which comes not only from technology but from the land itself. Together, the two characters unearth the betrayal of the system that has endangered their lives, reflect on its cracks, and through their alliance, reconnect with the ancestral strength of Matsieng. By making this strength their own, they begin to overturn the violent patriarchal system of the Murder Trials and the oppressive social reality in which they have been trapped, restoring ancient mythology while simultaneously rewriting its rules, and imagining a new reality where subjectivities like theirs are finally untouchable. With this poetic and allusive description, Tsamaase captures the emotions and the atmosphere unfolding as new balances rise, sweeping away the old order:

We stand on a precipice of a new world. There's existence shimmering in the constellation. There is no god on the horizon; there is only smoke. The sun is a hot eye in the sky, scanning, burning always on a Sunday. Somewhere out there is a crucified criminal being found by the sun, by time, by me, being drawn out to this scene, this asylum of forgiveness. An exodus of citizens arrives at their appointed shells, discards their old bodies and enter new ones of their choice. A clean slate. Murder hangs in the air, like fine, sweet mist. Now, more than ever, we are Xem, and we women will be powerful, invincible warriors and horrifyingly untouchable. In our city, everyone lives forever. We are perfect; we are pure. (Tsamaase 2024, 402)

The novel's conclusion is profoundly impactful, and, once again, seems to draw from Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, while it also resonates with Balzano's claim that reproductive technologies do not automatically transform us into self-determined cyborgs free from economic, political, or personal constraints. What remains at the end of the novel is a "curious yet critical approach" (Balzano 2021, 90, 93, our translation) to technosciences, one that acknowledges their potential while also questioning who has access and who does not.

The image that unfolds in the novel's final lines clearly embodies the hallmarks of critical dystopia (Moylan and Baccolini 2003): it portrays a world filled with distortions, violence, and oppression, while simultaneously leaving open the possibility that this reality, as we have known it, may be coming to an end. It envisions a future illuminated by utopian impulses, proposing new communal configurations that transcend the nuclear family, biological reproduction, and rigid gender roles, thereby liberating society from patriarchal oppression. This allows the two protagonists, now united as allies, to realise the utopia once envisioned by Piercy and Firestone, and further developed by Tsamaase herself. There are glimpses, in the novel, of a-hierarchical kin-making, of lateral networks of family and community of non-biologically related individuals (Haraway 2016; Clarke and Haraway 2018), of reproductive justice as eco-justice. Nelah mentions several local organisations creating communities to offer a sense of place for people who were transplanted into different bodies, including herself: "because we understand each other's experience and lack of roots, we were able to find within each of us a sense of home" (Tsamaase 2024, 19). Nelah also touches upon a project she has submitted to the biannual Architecture Awards Grants for funding, named "Women Without Borders' eco-city": the project consists of a gated eco-friendly social housing community of over fifty homes meant to "empower women who are confined by gender, status, or poverty by breaking down those borders and empowering them to their ideal sustainable self" (Tsamaase 2024, 69). Although the novel does not delve deeply into the structure of these alternative communities, their utopian impulse is still maintained "*within* the work" (Moylan and Baccolini 2003, 7).

The possibilities emerging from this new wave of feminist science fiction invite a critical engagement with feminist philosophical and speculative perspectives on reproductive technologies, whose critical insights are more pressing than ever given the current all-out

assault on hard-earned reproductive rights. In line with Balzano’s “curious yet critical” approach, *Womb City*’s open ending engages readers by intersecting reproductive technologies with pre-existing cultural technologies of family and gender. It explores the potential of such technologies as a means of liberation from the tyranny of biology, by remaining acutely aware that the history of reproductive technologies has repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to reinforce, rather than dismantle, the power structures and contradictions of the society in which they are developed (Tripaldi 2024). By asking new questions and exploiting the potential scenarios and the ‘what ifs’ of reproductive futurism, we may challenge the constraints that biology, society, and culture impose on our bodies and lives, responding to Firestone’s call to transform such constraints if they do not align with our desires.

Notes

¹ See the report “Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance Six-Month Review,” published in 2018 by the Office of Foreign Assistance of the U.S Department of State: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/protecting-life-in-global-health-assistance-six-month-review/>. Accessed October 28, 2024.

² See “Remarks by Vice President Harris at a Campaign Event | Atlanta, GA”: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/09/20/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-at-a-campaign-event-atlanta-ga-2/>. Accessed October 28, 2024.

³ This reimagining of reproduction and caregiving structures is part of a broader feminist engagement with speculative fiction during the 1970s. Writers such as Joanna Russ and Ursula K. Le Guin also revolutionized the genre by challenging patriarchal assumptions and envisioning alternative social orders. Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975) disrupts traditional gender roles through its portrayal of parallel worlds with radically different gender dynamics, while Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974) explores an anarchist society that rejects capitalist and patriarchal hierarchies. These texts, like Piercy’s, liberated utopia from its roots in masculine social dreaming, reframing it as a space for feminist critique and possibility. By imagining societies that dismantle traditional family structures, economic systems, and gender binaries, these authors reshaped the boundaries of science fiction, making it a platform for envisioning transformative futures.

⁴ Original text: “Ricordate Sul filo del tempo di Piercy? È il romanzo di fantascienza che abbiamo usato contro la costruzione es-senzializzante della maternità, quello che per primo ci ha aiutate a capire che il lavoro riproduttivo deve essere redistribuito affinché non siano più sessi, razze e specie rese seconde a compierlo gratuitamente. Ricordate Mattapoisett? (...) Hanno rivoluzionato il sistema ri/produttivo praticando la giustizia multispecie. E se la chiamerete fantascienza femminista per sminuirla, cadrete in errore. La fantascienza femminista è filosofia e come la migliore filosofia è scarica elettrica dal potenziale sovversivo, condensato di epistemologie radicate nella carne, di estetiche dell’esistenza ed etiche ancorate alla materia: un serio, e altrettanto favoloso, progetto politico.” The translation from Italian is ours.

⁵ As defined by Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, “the new critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse within the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those collective ‘ex-centric’ subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule” (Moylan and Baccolini 2003, 7).

⁶ The author specifically traces the creation and foundations of both the Fertility Fund (an institution that manages assisted reproduction systems through advanced and cutting-edge technologies in the represented world) and the Murder Trials (a government apparatus responsible for monitoring crimes and controlling bodies, particularly female ones, via microchips) to Matsieng. According to Motswana tradition, Matsieng, a giant with one leg who emerged from a hole in the earth, is believed to be both the first person to have given rise to the local populations and the creator god. One of the major archaeological sites that might bear traces of such ancestors is located not far from Gaborone. The author thus seems to refer to this area, and this mythological cult, in describing the two most advanced technological systems that take shape within the dystopian world, emerging specifically next to this ancestral site of significance. Various religious cults are connected to this place, which, in contrast to

the hyper-advanced technological progress, focus instead on cults linked to the sacred waters of the area. For further information on the archaeological site, see Walker 1997. For more details on the mythology surrounding Matsieng, see Scheub 2000.

⁷ The gynecologist of the fertility centre explains the specific functioning of the Wombcubator to the protagonist and her husband in this passage from the novel: “Historically, women carried babies to term. That’s declined exponentially over the years. We curate an embryo using IVF and transplant the embryo into our Wombcubator, which is our term for artificial wombs.” [...] “The Wombcubator is AI- and human-monitored—nothing ever goes wrong. You’ll be able to monitor the fetus’s vitals and growth through visual feeds linked to your cell phones and other devices, which will allow you to see and talk to the baby remotely” (Tsamaase 2024, 20).

⁸ “Having a daughter is risky, and male heirs fare better in carrying the family line than a girl would” (Tsamaase 2024, 24), says the protagonist’s husband.

⁹ As Hortense Spillers (1987) previously observed – and as Saidiya Hartman explores further in a recent article – gestational language has been instrumental in expressing the world-making and world-breaking powers of racial slavery.

¹⁰ In *Womb City*’s dystopian world, Tsamaase seems to leave open the possibility of a future free from oppression for some marginalized identities, including LGBTQIA+ people, as evidenced by this passage: “In Nigeria, Uganda, and other African countries, many LGBTQIA people are microchipped. If they enter same-sex relationships, their microchips alert authorities, ending in a virtual prison sentencing and the loss of their bodies. Such bodies are rated low and cremated to avoid tarnishing the souls that would otherwise fill them. Only wealthy people can navigate these laws, while these laws devour the poor. The rich can buy new identities, smuggle their way out. Some parts of the world are disgusting, intolerable places to live” (Tsamaase 2024, 145). Notably, Botswana has recently taken steps toward more inclusive politics, decriminalizing homosexuality in 2019 (see Mendos *et al.* 2020).

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