

Smash the feminist family

An interview with Sophie Lewis

Sophie Lewis is an independent writer and scholar based in Philadelphia. Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family and its follow-up Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation were published by Verso in 2019 and 2022. In this interview with Radical Philosophy, Sophie is in conversation with Victoria Browne, Hannah Proctor and Rahul Rao, discussing their latest book, Enemy Feminisms: TERFs, Policewomen, and Girlbosses Against Liberation, published this year by Haymarket.

Radical Philosophy Can you tell us something about the decision to construct a history of ‘enemy feminisms’ largely through a series of biographical portraits? What does this narrative device help you to do? Should we read these individuals as social symptoms?

Sophie Lewis At the heart of *Enemy Feminisms*, the original impetus, is a reckoning with the instinctive charity with which feminists read feminists. This charity is based on correct impulses: not to entrench the ignoring of women’s intellectual and activist contributions, not to capitulate to societal seductions for women to build their careers on tearing other women down, a wariness of trashing as well as ‘matricide’. But it is also a dangerous impulse that leads to too much papering over and whitewashing. My title calls out a mistake – our habit of not counting opponents as feminists – where we try to resolve the problem in such a way that we can love all feminists, simply by excluding those we cannot like.

It’s a necessarily intimate project. I’m not making sweeping taxonomical gestures, but rather looking concretely at how brilliant women – legitimately and recognisably feminist in aim – make sense of their times in such a way as to produce a feminism of fools. I see this engagement as practical and urgent, not academic or purely historical, because it’s about interrogating how messy and complicated our current and future battle lines are. Additionally, it was important to get biographical because such specificity is what cuts through our epistemic resistance to the idea that ‘real’ feminists wrought ‘real’ evil. I found it interesting in its own right to make my theoretical intervention via this ‘storytelling’ mode, precisely because it forced me to grapple with the extent to which people both are and aren’t social symptoms, i.e. phenomena merely ‘of their time’, manifesting bigger forces and logics. People, after all – for better and worse – are constantly doing things that bring new times, worlds and horizons into being. While it is a peculiar effect of much classic feminist historiography *not* to give women from the past ‘full credit’, as it were, for their misdeeds, I am insisting that women (specifically feminists, in this case), while embodying the *feminisms* they created, share responsibility for the dark sides of history, not just the light.

RP How have you come to your style of writing? Your last two books could probably be understood as manifestos whereas you have described this one as a ‘bestiary’. Why did that seem like the appropriate genre? And what underpins your intentionally anachronistic use of a con-

temporary argot to describe historical figures (Victoria as girlboss, the KKK as proto-Mumsnet and so on)?

SL Are style and genre interrelated, or are these separate questions? When it comes to the latter, I'd probably start by pointing to what certainly *appears* to be a shift towards the 'negative' in the most recent book: my prescriptions here arise from descriptions of tragedies and mistakes, whereas the earlier work was limning a 'positive' possibility by unearthing forgotten family-abolitionist and motherhood-abolitionist political lineages. *Full Surrogacy Now* and its short follow-up are part of the same proposition – a single thought, really – and their titles are both affirmative utopianist injunctions. (However, I should mention: I'm not sure they *are* true manifestos at all, despite the claim to being one in the subtitle of *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*.) In contrast, on its face at least, *Enemy Feminisms* is totally different. Rather than boldly and optimistically turning the capitalist kinship-form inside out, here I am chewing uncomfortably on a two-hundred-year legacy of mutant, liberal and fascist, political DNA, only to insist: these enemies are our enemy *kin*. Underlyingly, though, this means that the manifesto and the bestiary are linked. The first articulates feminism qua care communisation, a.k.a. family abolition, and the second fills out the picture with this communist feminism's uncanny doppelgängers, seductive opposites and counterinsurgent antagonists (what feminism also *is*, as opposed to what it *ought* to be, and happily sometimes has been). The first gesture was 'feminism against family' (*Full Surrogacy Now*'s subtitle). Could we paraphrase the second as 'smash the feminist family too'?

Style-wise, I imagine the only really relevant fact is that I embarked in 2017 on a career as a working non-academic, or ex-academic, or para-academic writer. I'm trying to make the reader's experience flow, and I like to communicate via humour, via jokes. I attempt to attend to things like rhythm. (Again: writing is how I pay my rent, not any academic job.) As for my penchant for argotnautical anachronism: I've never thought about it, but it's part of the quest for warmth, insight and pleasure. I trust that my linking of 1920s KKK feminism and Mumsnet will not – cannot – be understood as trivial or trivialising. In fact, I am confident that analogies like that serve as illuminating defamiliarisations, jolting us into self-awareness. If they're additionally funny, then all the better. It occurs to me, on that note, that laughter and irony are explicit ingredients of the ultra-earnest message of the 'Cyborg Manifesto', a text whose style and politics both marked me profoundly at an early age. I suspect that my writing (like Donna Haraway's) will always be rooted in and in conversation with formal academic prose at the same time as, aspirationally, playing and singing. Perhaps the least I can do – or should I say the most? – is infuse a little warmth into my sentences, so as to undermine the unearned power of stuffy academic claims to seriousness even as I remain, as Haraway puts it, 'deadly serious'.

RP How have you navigated the move from academia to being a public intellectual on the left – both in terms of the shifts in style this necessitates but also in terms of audiences and public exposure? Is there a desire to speak to people who might not already share your political commitments and persuade them to shift to the left?

SL I sense that what I want is to seduce people into antiwork communism, rather than 'persuade' them; and my strategy, quite often, it seems, is to talk as though it were already so. In other words, there's a playful (or is it totalitarian?) assumption I operate on, that everyone is already on my side, so it's all just a question of clarifying that fact – or, alternatively,

forcing a disavowed enmity into the open. To the extent that I've 'navigated' my passage from the ivory tower to the culture industry with any kind of purpose or clue, I've tried to reach bigger audiences – yes, of course – by gaining practice as a public speaker, learning about effective communication in that context, and writing in journalistic formats when given the opportunity. Nonetheless, I have found that these bigger audiences often come when one isn't trying at all (e.g. I notoriously gained major visibility in the winter of 2019 over some idly tweeted analysis of a Netflix octopus documentary). In other words, the routes to a wider readership are often unpredictable, fairly arbitrary and uncontrollable. Moreover, mere 'exposure' is worth very little by itself: contrary to the popular wisdom, not all publicity is good publicity. Who would want to be misread as a provocateur or 'ragebaiter'?

I invite and delight in comradely critique and disagreement, but I have no desire to accrue haters (even if it's anthropologically interesting to observe oneself becoming the repeated subject of pile-ons because of one's positions on abortion, trans liberation, children's bodily autonomy or Palestine). It's a simple fact: to write in the name of gestational and sexual freedoms, or abolition of the family, or anti-Zionism, is to suffer online abuse. I accept it. I cannot remember a time before I wanted to be a writer, and it's an unfathomable honour, a wildly strange feeling, for that dream to have 'come true', especially because it never exactly felt like I was being brave or clear-eyed enough to *decide to quit* academia. My gradual half-conscious leaning-out of institutional space – to which I am, it seems, allergic – took many years, and I have no way of knowing where I'd be today if the former Verso editor Rosie Warren hadn't invited me to write *Full Surrogacy Now* in 2016, on the strength of an essay she'd found by me, online, about the TV show *First Dates*.

That debut book is based on my PhD, which was in Geography, but, candidly, *Full Surrogacy Now* isn't neatly distinguishable, from my point of view – either in method or aim – from what I do now, or for that matter from whatever I was doing beforehand when I was in English Literature or Politics. I don't feel like I've ever been up to meaningfully different things, not least because there's only really one thing I feel I know how to do. All in all, the transition I've made has been piecemeal, circumstantial, improvised; I know firsthand what 'workaholism' is and about being broke, and/but my choices suggest I would rather remain precarious into my late thirties than be 'secure' and institutionalised. All this time, despite occasionally trying to force myself, I hardly applied for any jobs. Sure, all my degrees are in different disciplines anyway, and I moved joblessly – for love – to the US in 2017, where my C.V. is possibly even more illegible and unemployable than it would be elsewhere. But equally, it's undeniable that a stubborn streak of Bartleby-esque '*I would prefer not to*' asserted itself in me. A certain cussedness, down for the extra-mural hustle.

RP The metaphors we work with reflect and engender certain ways of thinking about and doing politics, including *broad churches*, *big tents* and *umbrellas*, as well as military metaphors like *the trenches* and *doing battle*: can you speak to your own use of metaphor?

SL It's one of my core questions: how to intervene in the conversation around 'white feminism' in such a way as to introduce alternatives to the 'tent' and 'umbrella' metaphors operative there? That particular imagery is all about inclusivity but, you know: if a tent is made of cissexist cloth, why would you want to enlarge it? Similarly, 'problematic' feminisms have typically been described in the mainstream discussions of recent years as 'leaving other women behind' – yet why would we assume that the destination is somewhere the 'other' women would want to visit in the first place? I'm constantly floating counter-metaphors in

Enemy Feminisms: I suggest we might ‘break up the house of feminism’, and that some of the ideologies living in our very own neighbourhoods are fascisms against which barricades must be built. In other contexts, I’ve invited us to think of feminism as containing, per the popular meme, ‘two wolves’. The ongoing plea is that we move beyond metaphoric repertoires that purify feminism by holding it conceptually apart from ‘other’ potentially contaminating historical forces (e.g. ‘strange bedfellows’).

How else might we talk about the ugliness haunting our ancestors’ records? As I’ve already suggested, the grammar of *linkage* (i.e. A and B get into bed together) is ultimately a sanitising, not to mention consolatory, tactic. Instead of allowing that a given feminism might be reactionary, or a form of exploitation meaningfully feminist – which would mean grappling with the discomfiting consequences of that thought – we say that feminists have become complicit in, co-opted by, opportunistically weaponised by, insincerely instrumentalised by, or tricked into something else: a completely distinct, separate evil. But what if the feminism itself has been a big enough girl, as it were, to do its own weaponising, co-opting, attracting, recruiting, and so on? The language of ‘enmity’ aims to equip us to think about feminism as non-synonymous with antifascism, even as feminism is necessarily central to any effective antifascist struggle.



RP Early in the book, you note a difference between ‘forgiving enemies and giving up the fight against them’. Can you say a bit more about this? Why forgive at all?

SL I specifically don’t say that forgiveness is imperative or even desirable (I don’t think I have a view on that question). What I’m considering, in that passage, is the possibility that forgiveness of one’s enemies is common and – for better or worse – *likely*, be that witting or unwitting. The point is that the human social mechanism whereby ‘to understand all is to

forgive all' poses a challenge for antifascism. So, the message I'm offering to feminists who are struggling to treat other feminists as fascists is this: Forgive and understand all you want! – but if a sister crosses one of the lines that your group has identified as 'red lines', make her life hell, do not hesitate. Deplatform, disempower, denounce; *force* her to stop being a fascist. That's all I'm saying. If one finds that one is feeling empathetic vis-à-vis an enemy, what does one do? Simple. One still fights them.

RP Related to the question of forgiveness, would it also be possible to talk about 'frenemy feminisms'? Your generously critical earlier articles on Donna Haraway and Shulamith Firestone suggest that they could maybe be understood as frenemy feminists and perhaps we could add Silvia Federici to the list (if the term is defined as feminists who have said deeply problematic things but whose work nonetheless remains valuable).

SL I have used the term 'frenemy' in a different context – in my essay 'Amniotechnics', which became the final chapter of *Full Surrogacy Now*, where that word describes the human relationship to water – because I think it usefully captures a contradictory state of nurture and danger. I feel far more hesitant to talk about 'frenemy feminisms', however, and I certainly wouldn't characterise my critical paeans to Haraway and Firestone in those terms. My disagreements there, for me, are comradely ones, because these bodies of work are truly vital – i.e. anything but disposable – in my eyes. Are Haraway and Firestone 'problematic'? If the word 'problematic' ever had any purchase on its objects, it feels to me as though it now has absolutely none; it amounts to a memed and ridiculed moral posture. What position could possibly be un-problematic? We must be more specific and say what we mean when we call something or someone out, as in, 'technophobic', 'racist', 'misanthropic', 'bioconservative', 'cissexist', 'femmephobic', and so on.

As multiple reviewers noted at the time of its publication, there are absurdly sloppy elements of transphobia in Silvia's essay collection *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*, themselves embedded in a wider argument about 're-enchantment' that represents a substantial reversal of her 1970s *Wages Against Housework*-era theorising. For me, what I know of her meagre recent contribution to anti-trans philosophy does not (yet) rise to the level of an enemy feminism, especially in light of my intuition that one could easily turn Federici against Federici, so to speak, using the denaturalising tools from her earlier body of work to combat the lazy, half-baked bits of pro-cisness in her later takes. In *Enemy Feminisms*, obviously, I am interested in how we hold on to each other, not just how we draw lines and face off. I showcase the transfeminist activist Bryn Kelly's compassionate approach to Adrienne Rich (who helped Janice Raymond write the transmisogynistic fountainhead *The Transsexual Empire*). Bryn's is the approach I would probably reach for in relation to Federici: 'Hey, did you know you hurt me? Can we talk about that?'

RP How do you negotiate the tension between identifying red lines and resisting the purgative impulse of fascistic politics? For instance, using the word 'enemy' insists on a strong sense of disidentification (us/them) but on the other hand you argue that these enemies should still be understood as part of feminism and not positioned outside of it. If we understand all of these 'enemy feminist' strands of thought – colonial, racist, transphobic, pornophobic, antiabortion, etc. – as being so firmly part of the histories and theories of feminism, then how is feminism defined, and is feminism still something worth fighting over and for? And, relatedly, how are these different feminisms related to one another? Do they have a dialectical relationship? Is

there an internal dialectic to feminism?

SL It is a real tension, one that I observe in everyday life, in the sense that sometimes we have to punch fascists in the face even when we understand them to be, in a sense, our kin. Hatred (even of fascists) and enmity (even vis-à-vis fascists) are emotions that get a very bad rap; I think it's fair to say we're phobic of these types of relation and unwilling to explore how to inhabit them honourably. Negativity in general is viewed as unconstructive, and it is commonplace to demand a complement of 'good news', like a wine pairing, alongside every piece of 'bad news' about our cultural or political ancestors. Editors at larger presses tried to pressure me a little to this end, in fact, before I ultimately sold my proposal for *Enemy Feminisms* to Haymarket. Couldn't I showcase a comrade feminist side-by-side with every enemy? Couldn't I concentrate on bridge-building and reconciliation, instead of performing, if you will, conflict escalation, highlighting utterly opposed interests and agendas, making irresolvable antagonisms visible? The thing is: no, I couldn't. That would be a different book. My bottom line is that the disidentificatory space of 'us versus them' is unavoidable in politics. Solidarity boils down, so often, in practice, to *which side are you on?* – and the trick is to make sure that one's own 'side' keeps on becoming and morphing unceasingly, never calcifying into a 'nation'. Enmity is a dangerous intimacy; it has to be constantly prevented from crystallising into something ontological and turning into naturalised otherness. The process of line-drawing has to be repeated all the time, and comradely disagreement, 'impurity', hospitality and non-disposability among our own ranks have to be cherished values. In short, yes: if the book tried to determine exactly where red lines should be, or imagined itself as showcasing a perfect, pure, unerring, un-messy, blemish-free politics, then it would indeed be repeating the purgative logic at the core of the fascistic politics I'm attempting to crack open.

There is a dialectic internal to feminism, one I think of as generative. One expression of it is that famous phrase 'pleasure and danger'; another, the transcendence of sex, on the one hand, and the valorisation of women's autonomy, on the other. But there is also an opposition that may not be dialectical at all, and this is what I've already said I half-jokingly think of in terms of 'two wolves'. My mental shorthand for that core axis of enmity is: cisness versus abolition, or *the feminists of securitisation* versus *the feminists of care-communisation*. Put differently, what I'm proposing is that canonical Western feminism has an imperfect and messy (of course) but nonetheless anticolonial, anti-propertarian, expansively sex-radical, fugitive proletarian 'undercommons', and the latter has suffered systematic counterinsurgent repression and erasure at the hands of the former's respectability politics. It is because of that 'shadow' feminism – this utopian antifascist legacy that we must not dishonour or forget, even if we sometimes only find ghostly traces of it in the archives – that we cannot cede the name of 'feminism' to the enemy feminists. It would be a shame for this term to become the exclusive name of those forces that have staged internal bourgeois counterrevolutions against gender liberation again and again (while trying to convince us that they themselves were the only ones around).

It would also be a mistake, because 'feminism' remains one of the best names communists have for the adequately radical critique of capital that extols the priority of lifemaking over accumulation while laying bare the violence, not only of the wage, but all capitalist work. The potential collective *eros* of revolutionary feminism, or family abolition, or anti-colonial queer-utopian feminism (whatever we want to call it) is certain to continue to elude us,

I feel, if we can't move past the uneasiness and discomfort of the prevalent terms of the 'white feminism' conversation, wherein 'problematic' feminisms are imagined as undesirable variations on a single theme – rather than genuine historic antagonists of our politics. It can only do us good, ultimately, to admit it: feminism can also be a weapon of class discipline, a fully-fledged colonialism in its own right, or one of racism's forms of appearance; it can be a sex-nationalism or sex-Zionism; it can be a carceral-humanitarian weapon of the state.

After all, feminism, as I understand it, is any woman-led vindication of 'women's interests' against some kind of critical definition of patriarchy. (I think we need these three elements – [a] woman-led, [b] pro-women, and [c] against patriarchy in order to capture *pro-life feminism*, for example, in our net – because pro-life feminists view abortion as patriarchal and as anathema to female flourishing – while excluding tradwifery, which is woman-led and imagines itself to be in women's best interests, but rejects the idea that patriarchal injustice exists.) It's a definition that discards the many forms of organised womanhood that would, of course, say that they benefit women, yet are explicitly pro-patriarchal and understand themselves as antifeminist. As you know, my book is careful only to address formations that pitted themselves against a representation of male supremacy in their own self-understanding, no matter how minor (*pimps* ...), racialised (*immigrant rapists* ...) or fantasmatic (*the toilet interloper* ...) this representation might be. A comradely feminism, by contrast, is one that understands its own constituency as porous, intimately implicated in the system it is unmaking, and non-innocent.

RP At a number of junctures in the book, you suggest that the psychic formation of white feminism is shaped by the fact that it is an 'easier' response to gender oppression ('A woman swallows her own conspiracist and pseudoscientific bullshit about Black men's savage lasciviousness ... because it's easier than indicting her own husband, uncle, priest, dad or the family form itself'; 'Divisions like "productive-reproductive" and "private-public" feel rather abstract ... it would be easier to be able to paint a picture of our tormentor! ... Easier, anyway, than figuring out what unmaking the mode of production that underlies the logic of gender would entail. Easier to visualize the problem as a glass ceiling, a wage differential, an office sex pest ...'). Is there a particular theory of psychic formation at work here? Are we psychically lazy?

SL That's an interesting question. I, for one, am quite often very lazy in certain ways. But I suspect that the mechanisms that pull us into conspiracism, fascism, political 'diagonalism' and dangerously truncated anticapitalist critiques have less to do with an insufficient psychical 'work ethic' and more to do with the pleasure of refusing responsibility for the world. As such the implicit theory of psychic formation I'm working with is probably loosely borrowed (at least, this was the unconscious intention) from Paul Gilroy's essay 'Black Fascism' (2000) where he concludes that 'a susceptibility to the appeal of authoritarian irrationalism has become part of what it means to be a modern person.' Gilroy calls on 'blacks' to recognise that they 'are not, after all, a permanently innocent people' but, rather, 'modern folk who can think and act for ourselves.'¹ So – how can antifascists make the pleasures of non-innocence irresistible? This is a question less about overcoming laziness than about overcoming a fantasy of one's own innocence.

RP You talk about the improper use and appropriation of the term 'abolition' to describe some patently non-abolitionist campaigns such as those by the 'New Abolitionists' against sex work.

We see this with many terms that are in danger of becoming empty signifiers – ‘decolonisation’, ‘intersectionality’, etc. What should we do in the face of this danger? Stand our ground and fight for the most subversive interpretations possible, abandon the terms, or something else? How do we make decisions about when concepts have become so compromised that they need jettisoning or revisioning?

SL Honest answer: I don’t know. I am holding a torch for the definition of ‘abolition’ as ‘positive supersession’ even as I am painfully aware that the phrase ‘abolish the family’ conjures, inside many of the heads it reaches, visions of a nightmarish top-down process – carceral dystopia – rather than communisation. Is that irrational of me? Possibly! However, it’s hard to think of an important concept that isn’t widely misunderstood or hasn’t long been in danger of losing its radical significance. ‘Queerness’, for me, is the go-to example: what was a signifier of collective anti-proprietary insurgency becoming a widespread normative identity label. (Again, is it just stubbornness that drives my insistence on *remembering* that outmoded, anticapitalist valence of the ‘queer’?) ‘Intersectionality’ was done dirty by legal scholars, whereas it was originally an anti-imperialist movement-rooted heuristic. ‘Communism’, which I take to be an antiwork and antistate project, is similarly ‘compromised’ by the term’s association with state-capitalist historic regimes. ‘Feminism’ itself is a word some of us link to a struggle revolutionising every aspect of life, even as others (e.g. the historian of patriotic women, Elizabeth Cobbs) beamingly propose that nothing needs to change, in fact, nothing *ever* really needed smashing, it only needed gentle debugging – such that, job done, ‘we are all feminists’ now. When terms become so abused, it makes sense to consider jettisoning them. I’m just skeptical that any term is immune.

RP The chapter on feminism and fascism tells a powerful story about the genealogical connections, overlaps and resonances between the suffragist movement and British fascism. One question you ask and answer is ‘what happens to a feminism ... when it relies too heavily on terrorism ... the answer is always: it lurches inexorably to the right.’ Is this an argument you would extend to all political movements? Is this an argument against terrorism or political violence generally, or one about its particular incompatibilities with feminism?

SL I welcome this question, since I regret not only that I didn’t expand properly on this point, but also that I apparently phrased it in such a way that I can be heard as denouncing left political violence per se. I reject the premise that one can be meaningfully ‘against’ political violence, since the state’s political violence is already the status quo. I am not making an argument about a particular incompatibility between feminism and political violence, either. What I am gesturing towards is a dynamic where an organisation comes to rely ‘too heavily’, be that because it has no other choice or for some other reason, on methods of ‘terror’ such as bombing. My claim is that going underground paramilitaristically as a tiny vanguardist cell, to make and plant nitroglycerine-and nail-bombs (as Emmeline Pankhurst’s army of suffragettes did), opens up psychic arenas of hardened self-romanticisation and adventurism, via the imperative to crush all self-doubt as one crushes one’s fear. (N.B. This is not the case when a guerrilla armed struggle is grounded in mass popular support.) Of course, Mrs Pankhurst’s paramilitary was already widely viewed as right-wing and totalitarian by other feminists, even before its terror campaign kicked off in 1908; but thereafter, its proto-fascistic, braggadocious internal culture, predicated on an assumption of women’s innocence, worsened. So, I am pointing to an authoritarian internal modality that seems to follow when a turn is made –

albeit in ‘understandable’, depressing historic circumstances, and often (unlike the WSPU) in conscious desperation and despair – towards using stochastic spectacular violence via incendiary devices, in lieu of, rather than in addition to, mass organising and large-scale direct actions such as strikes and building occupations. I recognise that what constitutes ‘too much’ here is utterly subjective, and I also want to repeat that I think there is a role for these tactics. But it also seems clear to me – from what I know of the histories of groups one could describe as ‘relying too heavily’ on bombs, from the Rote Zora to the Red Brigades to the Weather Underground – that there are ideological dangers to taking that kind of path.

RP There is a bigish temporal jump in the book from the 1940s to the 1970s when you describe the advent of an anti-porn culturalist feminism (genuinely ‘merely cultural’) that focused on ‘objectification’ of women rather than defying the state or capital and that called itself ‘radical feminism’. This chapter feels quite pivotal, not least because the stakes are quite literally visceral. Would you say that this is the origin story of contemporary TERFism and that we might ‘still’ be in this moment?

SL Exactly. I would. I imagine the book in two halves, organised on either side of that temporal gulf you mention, and the narrative of the second half (beginning with 1970s anti-prostitution and culminating in 2020s anti-abortion, anti-sex, anti-trans feminism) is designed to periodise today’s ‘ultimate’ feminism of cisness – TERFism – within that long shadow. This is a story about the (‘visceral’,

as you say, but specifically also sexually *nationalist* and border-securitising) casting-out of penile corporeality from the innocent circle of female flesh, such that even the practice of ‘topping’ and ‘bottoming’ within lesbian eroticism eventually gets assimilated with heteromasochism and male violence, alongside all forms of penetration, and alongside the actual human ‘refugees’ of gender – trans



people – whose yearning for female embodiment and active pleasure in it undermines the ‘cultural feminist’ definition of femaleness *qua* bodily suffering. It’s a story about the defeat of the Long Sixties and specifically the tragic triumph of pornophobia – i.e. the sex-worker exclusionary repudiation of *porn*, as in, whoreness – over the radical feminism whose face and name it ate. It is an ongoing source of consternation to me that pornophobia is misnamed ‘radical feminism’ in so many circles today, not least amongst a new generation of self-described ‘radfems’ who embrace a deeply anti-utopian Dworkinism. (I describe this in a recent piece arguing against the ongoing literary revival of Andrea Dworkin, wherein I revisit Dworkin’s penultimate – virulently Zionist – book *Scapegoat*, which is a plea for a kind of sex-Zionism she wants women to carry out in a manner modelled on the Israeli occupation of Palestine.²) From the fleeting popularity in the West of Korean ‘4B’ female-separatist girlboss discourse, to the ongoing enthusiasm for nihilistic ‘femosphere’ self-help online (‘Andrew

Tate for women ...'), and from 'feminism's Brexiteers' (as Sarah Franklin once called TERFs) to the ambient 'heteropessimism' that Asa Seresin identified in 2019 – which conspicuously does not seek to *change* the drastic disappointingness of men – I see hauntings from the 'femopessimist' intrafeminist counterrevolution of the 70s everywhere I look.

RP The recognition that women of colour might themselves be agents of white feminism (e.g. Ayaan Hirsi Ali) is a powerful and salutary corrective to the facile tendency to assume that diversity of representation is in itself ever an advance. Yet it is an argument that feminists who happen to be white often find themselves unable to make because of positionality politics. It does not seem to be enough to say that the possible socialist and antiracist credentials of such feminists might give them the necessary legitimacy to do this work, given that some of the most troubling feminists of colour themselves emerge from such a politics (one thinks here of some WoC feminists in the UK who emerge out of a tradition of socialist antiracist feminism but have latterly taken problematic TERFy and Islamophobic positions as part of a more general state feminist turn). Who is best placed to call out this shift, or should the question of 'legitimacy to call out' trouble us less than it does?

SL I don't think, though, that today's non-white advocates of annihilationist politics – feminist or no – necessarily represent a 'shift': rightism has long had non-white exponents, architects and apologists. (I reference this in several places in the book, actually, for instance when I mention nineteenth-century black feminist eugenicism and frame it as structurally aligned with white supremacy.) Already almost a century ago, as Gilroy writes in the aforementioned essay 'Black Fascism', there were 'fascist' logics in Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. Now, in the twenty-first century, as you indicate, we've seen the rise not only of far-right black female antifeminists like Kemi Badenoch and Candace Owens, alongside 'the 2022 Group' in the UK and 'Black Conservative Federation' in the US, but also of black 'enemy' feminists who sometimes have backgrounds in left movements, such as the anti-trans 'sex-based rights' activists Linda Bellos, Allison Bailey and Sonia Appleby or – elsewhere in the world – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Laetitia Ky (an Ivorian artist in her twenties).

The latter crowd makes a lot of noise about the positional illegitimacy, i.e. usually whiteness or perceived maleness, of their critics. But if we are truly speaking a liberatory critique, I don't see why we should hesitate, regardless of how we are positioned. There is nothing inherently delegitimising about speaking from a relatively privileged standpoint against reactionary views that happen to be emanating from an historically marginalised person or group. Often, as you say, it is uncomfortable (and subject to mockery) to call out these political actors as racist, colonialist and white-supremacist when one happens to be white oneself. But anti-racism and anti-cisness obviously aren't the precinct of nonwhite and noncis people alone, not least because racism and cisness brutalise us all. So, we're going to have to get much more agile on this terrain fast, since the age of what we might call *fascism with an intersectional face* – from Latinx-feminist CIA adverts to Suella Braverman, from the trans YouTuber and MAGA stalwart Blaire White to the black Moms for Liberty officer Tia Bess – is long since upon us.

RP In your chapter on anti-abortion feminism, you write that 'as part of my "critical utopianism", I wonder if we could arrive, one day, at the as-yet-unthinkable place where giving fetuses ethical consideration *has* become practically possible, perhaps thanks to gestator-controlled

ectogenetic technologies, advances in obstetric medicine, and a reorganization of life's work, beyond the private nuclear household.' Please could you explain that thought in more detail for us, and also comment on how it illustrates or fits into your critical utopian project more generally?

SL In this fleeting thought-experiment, or little aside, I'm essentially asking: Do we know for sure that anthrogenesis – the manufacture of human beings – will always be organised the way it is now? Pregnancy is very deadly – currently, it claims about 300,000 adult lives a year – and I simply refuse to believe that things have to be this way. Could not science research and technological development, obstetric support investment and radical pro-gestator social change somehow coalesce into a situation where fetuses are *collectively* held, rather than holding a single adult gestator hostage (communal ectogenetic tanks, as famously seen in Marge Piercy's 1976 novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, would be one such scenario)? If so, and only if so, I think, the question then logically arises: Would there be considerations worth taking seriously *other* than – as is the case now – a gestational progenitor's prerogative to stop giving life to a specific fetus? In the first place, will it always be the case that every new human person emerges in the same violent and miraculous way they do currently, i.e. through the matrix of a labouring non-individual body ('the motherfetus', to use Chikako Takeshita's term)? And in a society in which children generally are no longer viewed as personal property or private possessions, would there be room in a politics like mine – an uncompromisingly pro-abortion, as well as aspirationally child-liberationist politics – to give weight to the idea that fetuses should be kept alive even when they're extracted from the motherfetus? It seems to me that there probably would, simply because killing is something that should always be undertaken thoughtfully and seriously.

I say that abortion is 'killing' – that's the starting point for all of the above. In my view, to pretend that nothing and no one dies when gestational labour is stopped is, actually, to denigrate gestational labour. As such, the headline that *The Nation* chose for my article in 2022 after the fall of *Roe v. Wade* – 'Abortion Involves Killing, and That's OK!' – rather misrepresents one of my core arguments, which is that killing is probably never or hardly ever OK (in the sense of 'ethically unremarkable'), even though it is often *good* (in the sense of 'productive of happiness'). Admittedly this difference between 'good' and 'OK' is a slippery thing, but it is real, and rests on the distinction between politics and ethics. Like most (all?) communists I'm far more interested in the political than the ethical, and that's why my long-term project has attempted to bring the whole topic of gestation out of the latter (bioethical) sphere, into the former (labour), which is where it can be animated in terms of needs, desires, violence and freedoms, as opposed to rights, principles, adjudications and categorical imperatives. I guess you could say I've been trying to think antiwork Marxism vis-à-vis this specific human labour, babymaking, for over a decade.

I've more generally been thinking with the unorthodox marxian feminist Donna Haraway's framework of interspecies 'responsibility' for almost *two* decades. Per her *When Species Meet*, it is a dangerous fantasy and straight-up empirical falsehood to imagine that people can meaningfully aspire to 'not kill' in the context of contemporary capitalist-colonial society. After all, not only do we kill all the time – participating in myriad forms of state- and market-mediated killing with every cent we put into circulation – but many instances of killing are actively beneficial: the Italian Resistance's execution of Mussolini comes to mind. 'Perhaps', suggests Haraway, 'the commandment should read, "Thou shalt not make killable." The

problem is actually to understand that human beings do not get a pass on the necessity of killing significant others.’ Reading these words, I recalled how, even as a teen, I felt vaguely dissatisfied with the ‘clump of cells’ line of argumentation in ‘pro-choice’ politics – wherein there is nothing *to kill* inside the labouring uterus. Thus, in my twenties, I started reaching for Haraway’s orientation to what she calls ‘the necessity and labor of killing’ in order to try to think through abortion.³

Of course, a human fetus is not an organism of a different *species* to the gestator. Yet despite this, fetuses, as I contend in my wannabe-Harawavian intervention ‘Amniotechnics’, *are* fundamentally alien, underwater creatures whose relationship to the gestators they corporeally co-compose is usefully illuminated through the lens of the nonhuman other; of xenohospitality and multispecies *response-ability*. Basically, one of the things I think I’ve been attempting to articulate over and over in different ways ever since *Full Surrogacy Now* is that we can and must find a way of full-throatedly vindicating abortion – i.e. the gestational labourer’s absolute prerogative to self-extricate from the gestational workplace that is her own placenta, which currently is the same thing as killing and maybe will always be – without however rendering the fetus ‘killable’ in the process. We can and ought to resist that impulse, to ethically ‘tidy up’ feticide, not least because seeking recourse in a notion of anything’s inherent ‘killability’ is a fascistic manoeuvre that is liable to shape other aspects of our dealings with the rest of the living world. To say so does not take away from, but actually strengthens in the long-term, the absolute prerogative of gestational labourers to be universally supported – no questions asked – to stop being pregnant for free, on demand. To reiterate what I mean here: gestational labour literally creates people, what could possibly deserve more trust than that? How can we accomplish an adequate valorisation of gestational labour if we aren’t willing to admit that gestational labour *stoppage* involves killing? Death is the flipside of life. As Emma Heaney suggests in her forthcoming book *This Watery Place* (2025), ‘The miracle of life is obscured’, actually, by the premature identification of the fetus with human beings’ entitlement to stay alive, ‘and the resulting erasure of the valour of gestation.’

Notes

1. Paul Gilroy, ‘Black Fascism’, *Transition* 81/82 (2000), 70–91, 91.
2. Sophie Lewis, “‘Are Women Weak Jews?’ On Andrea Dworkin’s Zionism”, *Spectre*, May 27 2025.
3. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 80.