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PARENTHOOD, CLIMATE JUSTICE AND THE ETHICS OF CARE: NOTES TOWARDS A QUEER ANALYSIS

abstract

This co-authored contribution takes the form of a dialogue between Carmen Dell'Aversano and Florian Mussgnug. The two discussants explore the concepts of parenthood, reproduction and care in the context of the unfolding global environmental crisis. Arguing from the perspectives of queer theory, literary studies and climate justice, they call for new strategies and attitudes towards procreation, beyond the strictures of colonizing frames of knowledge and hegemonic cultural practices. More specifically, Dell'Aversano and Mussgnug move the debate around assisted reproductive technologies in new, speculative directions that are centred on shared vulnerability and kinship, and which remain fully attentive to human and non-human relations and shared responsibilities on a warming planet.

keywords

responsibility, care, queer, parenthood, animal/human, kinship, climate justice, speculative fiction

Our conversation explores the concepts of parenthood, reproduction and care in the context of the unfolding global environmental crisis. Arguing from the perspectives of queer theory, literary studies and climate justice, we call for new strategies and attitudes towards procreation, beyond the strictures of colonizing frames of knowledge and hegemonic cultural practices. More specifically, we seek to move the debate around assisted reproductive technologies (ART) in new, speculative directions that are centred on shared vulnerability and kinship, and which remain fully attentive to human and non-human relations and shared responsibilities on a warming planet. We come to this debate from related but distinct disciplinary backgrounds and with different urgencies, but agree on a set of assumptions. First, we share the belief that human reproduction is not in itself an inherent good and that a carefully reasoned case for the permissibility and desirability of procreation can and must be made in each and every case, in relation to the contingent factors that will be discussed in this text. Secondly, we are averse to coercive policies and mechanisms of population control that violate individual reproductive lives and futures. Finally, and most importantly for the purpose of this discussion, we object to what we perceive as a widespread tendency to discuss reproductive rights exclusively in relation to the needs of the well-resourced individualized user – frequently an inhabitant of the global North – in the face of persistent patterns of racist, colonial and heteropatriarchal violence. Against this trend, we insist that meaningful parental responsibility, not only in the context of ART, must be grounded in an egalitarian, transcultural and post-anthropocentric ethics of planetary care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). As gender theorist Michelle Murphy puts it, with memorable clarity: “If you cannot drink the water, there is no reproductive justice” (Murphy 2018: 109). Humans live, die and reproduce in the company of other beings. In light of this, our analysis of parenthood affirms the importance of versatile practices that hold the power to support planetary life and the more than human world, not as a mere backdrop or context for human stories, but as a co-constitutive presence that intersects with human culture and society in a single material and ethical force field.

F.M.: Let me begin by sketching the topic of our conversation from the perspective of my work in the environmental humanities. Since 2000, the concept of the Anthropocene has functioned as an important vector for cross-disciplinary research and artistic practice (Clark 2015; Davies 2016; Yusoff 2018). Novelists and visual artists have turned their attention to environmental degradation, planetary deep time and ecological entanglement. An increasing number of works have focused on natural processes and forms that are affected by human activities and impinge

upon them: hurricanes, floods, unprecedented heatwaves, habitat destruction, pollution, mass extinction, and so on. These threats have already transformed our lives and, in a matter of decades or even years, will put an end to many familiar comforts and places. The climate crisis therefore requires not only urgent political action, but also a radical re-orientation of our technologies, ethics and values, and a re-assessment of what it means to be human. In this context, human procreation raises urgent and uncomfortable questions. If the human world population continues to grow in the way that it has, future humans will in all likelihood be condemned to vastly inferior lives, and may face resource wars and violence on a global scale. Other species will also suffer the consequences of human population growth, in even more direct and often fatal ways. (Wilson 2004; Heise 2016). But can and should we seek to reduce the number of human births? The problem is familiar to philosophers, and has – in recent years – been addressed with increasing urgency by social scientists, popular science authors, and ecocritics, among others (Weisman 2013; Collings 2014; Conly 2016). Several issues are at stake here: the conflict between individual rights and our entangled planetary future; mass extinction; the complexity of large social and ecological systems and the challenges they pose to demographic forecast; concerns about global inequality and about the abuse of state power; the unpredictable role of new ART. At an individual level, fears and hopes for our future and the future of our children also play a central role. How do you frame this set of concerns in relation to your research interests?

C.D.A.: My considerations on parenthood and its relationship with reproductive technologies arise from, and are connected by, a queer theory perspective. When, together with a number of colleagues from several universities, I established the first queer studies centre in the Italian university system,¹ we decided that our common work would be held together by a more abstract and general approach to queer theory than is customarily encountered in most of academia. Taking our cue from a number of pronouncements by some of the most significant queer studies scholars,² we chose to focus on the application of the theoretical constructs of queer beyond the historically central fields of sexuality and gender. In our view the most basic, and at the same time the most abstract, idea in queer studies is the deontologization of categories,³ first of all of the categories towards which a given culture makes it compulsory to position oneself, those which define social identity.⁴ As a consequence, in reflecting about the way the contemporary debate about parenthood in relation to reproductive technologies is framed, I will single out some details about the way the relevant social categories are conceptualized, and the relationships among them are played out. I will anticipate one major point by stating at the

1 CIRQUE (Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca Queer–Inter–University Centre for Queer Research): <https://cirque.unipi.it/>

2 Among the most significant: “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence” (Halperin 1995: 62); “Queer [...] does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance” (Halperin 1995: 62); “[A] lot of the more exciting work around “queer” spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender or sexuality at all. [...] Queer’s denaturalising impulse may well find an articulation within precisely those contexts to which it has been judged indifferent. [...] By refusing to crystallize in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal” (Sedgwick 1993: 9); “It is necessary to affirm the contingency of the term [queer], to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments” (Butler 1993: 230).

3 This theoretical position is outlined, and a number of its implications spelled out, in Dell’Aversano 2018.

4 Performativity, which is arguably the most widely applied concept in queer theory, is, from the logical viewpoint, nothing but a consequence of this questioning and deconstruction of categories: unless social categories are deontologized, they cannot be revealed as nothing more than the outcome of the iteration of performances.

outset that what I think happens as a consequence of these two factors is the creation of what I would like to call a conceptual chimaera, built up of inferentially incompatible constructions of relevant concepts.

F.M.: Reflecting on the social categories of motherhood and fatherhood, I am struck by the fact that many influential thinkers have treated parental responsibility as a seemingly stable category, without adequate attention to its historical roots, shifting social functions, and uncertain future. British philosopher Onora O'Neill, for example, has argued in a landmark essay published in 1979 that "the basis of parents' obligations and rights cannot lie solely or necessarily in a biological relationship between child and parents" but must reflect the obligation to rear a child "to at least that level which will minimally fit the child for independent adult life in its society" (O'Neill 1979: 26). This important definition of parenthood places an emphasis on epistemic and relational possibilities, but fails to engage with the external pressures that I have tried to summarise at the beginning of our conversation. How can we make sense of O'Neill's definition of parental responsibility in a rapidly changing and potentially catastrophic world? Can we even decide what it means to raise a child to be "minimally fit" for life, given the unpredictability of post-holocene societies and ecologies?

C.D.A.: Are you suggesting that analytic philosophers ought to be more attentive to the climate catastrophe?

F.M.: Your question makes me think of an extraordinary thought experiment by philosopher Tim Mulgan: *Ethics for a Broken World* (2011). In this book, Mulgan introduces and explains the key texts and theories of twentieth-century Anglophone political and moral theory from the perspective of a fictional philosopher on a tragically plausible future Earth. This "broken world" has nearly exhausted its capacity to sustain life as we know it. With an unsettling mixture of anger, regret, and profound disbelief, Mulgan's future philosopher revisits what he calls "the age of affluence": our present age, whose political and ethical theories, according to Mulgan, are tragically oblivious to the basic needs of future generations of human and nonhuman denizens. *Ethics for a Broken World* does not focus specifically on human procreation, but Mulgan's project appears relevant to our topic. How would the inhabitants of a "broken world" judge twentieth and twenty-first century reproductive habits and values, and the irresponsibly consumptive behaviour of present-day global elites? Let me phrase this question differently, to engage more directly with your interest in conceptual definitions: in your opinion, does the concept of parenthood – with its rich and nuanced history of social responsibility, power and authority – offer an adequate guide to human procreation?

C.D.A.: I would like to start with a number of apparently mundane and benign considerations. The first has to do with the nature of motherhood and fatherhood. Motherhood and fatherhood are social categories, as we have discussed. More specifically, motherhood and fatherhood are social categories into which grown-ups, especially women, with very few exceptions (such as members of the clergy, in religions in which the clergy is held to celibacy) are supposed to transition as a condition of being considered full-fledged adults; evidence for this is, for instance, the stigma on women who refuse to have children, or regret having done so.⁵ Moreover, motherhood and fatherhood are social categories into which one can only be legitimately

⁵ The childfree movement has been visible for some time despite vicious criticism and ubiquitous stigma, and has an established online presence. The first study of "regretting mothers" is Donath 2017.

inducted by another incumbent, who at the same time makes the transition herself or himself. Indeed, the wish to accomplish this transition, and the impossibility of accomplishing it on one's own, is one of the most important reasons people pair up. It should be born in mind that, until quite recently, there used to be no way that people could reap the social benefits (as opposed to the social opprobrium) of motherhood and fatherhood without being in a legitimate, preferably married, if at all possible heterosexual, couple; this is of course still the case in most of the non-WEIRD⁶ world, and for quite a few people in WEIRD societies as well.

F.M.: Motherhood and fatherhood are relational concepts. Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has argued that such concepts, in common parlance, are not simply expository devices (Strathern 2020: 13). They are frequently employed in a normative sense, to imply the desirability of close ties between people or mutuality of engagement...

C.D.A.: Evidence for this, as for the workings of social categories in general, is to be found in our experience of native speakers about the way language works. The principles I have just spelled out provide the underlying rationale for linguistic expressions like “giving one's husband/wife a baby”, “becoming a mother”, “making one's husband a father”, “making one's wife a mother” etc. These phrases would not exist, and would not be conceivable, utterable, or comprehensible, without implicit reference to the category structure I have just outlined. This structure is also, in my opinion, one major reason why, despite any number of changes, both technological and social, in the way reproduction actually takes place (an egg and sperm harvested from donors can be brought to term by a surrogate, and the resultant infant be adopted by a gay man living in a polyamorous family of adults who will all rear the child together...) I believe the stories we tell about reproduction will not evolve; indeed, why I feel we are doing all we can to keep them from evolving by clinging to an outmoded, ultimately untenable, model of the mechanics, structure, and consequences of reproduction.

F.M.: I am surprised by your claim that stories about reproduction will not evolve. ART features in numerous recent works of literature. Surrogate motherhood, for example, is a prominent theme in many recent, darkly speculative novels that have been grouped together under the label of feminist dystopia (Ditum 2018). I am thinking, for instance, of Jane Rogers' *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* (2011), Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), Helen Sedgwick, *The Growing Season* (2017), or Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks* (2018). Many of these writers have been directly inspired by Margaret Atwood's dystopian classic, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). At a superficial level, the success of their narratives seems to contradict your claim that category structures have survived unchallenged. But I suspect that this sense of contradiction is only apparent. Indeed, most twenty-first century reproductive dystopias are permeated by fears about the future, and by a deep sense of guilt towards unborn generations. Rogers, for example, describes a world of dwindling human fertility, where the reproductive lives of pregnant women are literally sacrificed to a violently pro-natalist regime, in order to guarantee the bare survival of the species. Similarly, *Red Clocks* imagines a world where every form of birth control or abortion is illegal. Generally speaking, many contemporary narratives of parenthood do not seek to promote alternative patterns of kinship or more hopeful

6 The acronym stands for “Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic”; it was first introduced by Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan in their seminal 2010 paper (Henrich et al. 2010), which first systematically called into question the broad claims about human psychology and behavior based on samples drawn entirely from societies which are outliers with respect both to the vast majority of present human population, and to the totality of historical human groups.

visions. Rather, at the intimate level of literary representation, our age appears profoundly pessimistic. In most literary accounts of the future, outmoded social structures persist, with fatal consequences.

C.D.A.: The novels you mention are a good example of the ubiquitousness of cultural representations of biological reproduction. Why is there such a wealth of representations of parents and children in social discourse? Because biological reproduction is a crucial part of the way societies and culture, literally, reproduce themselves and thus achieve continuity and also, in a manner of speaking, immortality. It is therefore vital that cultures get members invested in biological reproduction. How does this happen? Through the workings of a number of social mechanisms which direct members' desires (which are always culturally constructed) towards children as a socially sanctioned object.

F.M.: The child as a symbol of futurity?

C.D.A.: Exactly. This is achieved by framing reproduction in a number of interesting ways. First, reproduction is conceived as metaphorical immortality: our children are supposed to provide us with social continuity beyond individual death. This is one major reason why people make such momentous investments (both financial and existential) in children. Secondly, reproduction becomes an overarching, unfalsifiable, all-purpose teleology, which has the added benefit of turning, by a form of social sleight of hand, selfishness and megalomania into far-sighted altruism, since the quest to achieve status and amass wealth well beyond what a single individual may under any circumstances reasonably expect to need or use in their lifetime can be justified as rational because the privileges are going to be handed down to the following generation. Of course, the children's opinion about all this is never sought: if they display no interest in occupying the place their parents carved out for them this does not in any way cast doubts on the parents' designs on them but is dismissed as evidence of ingratitude. Finally, reproduction is marked as the achievement of a hierarchically superordinate social identity: full adulthood, as defined by the relationship to dependents who owe their very existence to us.

F.M.: Does this persistent social framing of parenthood stand in the way of alternative conceptions of parental responsibility? Do we need new categories and stories that are less concerned with parenthood as a social marker and more attentive to our shared planetary future?

C.D.A.: The reason I feel it is important to spell out these considerations is that they are crucial to our ability to productively interrogate the desire to be a parent. Any human who desires to be a parent is necessarily part of a society, and therefore, by desiring to be a parent, implicitly desires not a personal relationship to an individual who does not yet exist and about whom she knows nothing, but the social role of a parent in a given society. Therefore it is impossible to interrogate the desire to be a parent without interrogating the role of parenthood in the construction of social identities. First of all, how can people become suicidally depressed because they cannot have something they never had, such as a child? It is one thing to become depressed if you no longer have the two legs which have been part of your body from birth; it is quite another to become depressed if you realize you are not going to have a third leg implanted.

F.M.: Supernumerary limbs are not a widely recognised symbol of social success?

C.D.A.: Of course I am being deliberately disingenuous. Non-parents are all too well aware that becoming a parent is not like having a third leg implanted: it is like going through puberty

or finding a job: it is a necessary experience to have to achieve full adult status; and this is so much more for women than for men, from the Biblical cry of Rachel to Jacob “give me children or else I die” to the contemporary women becoming “bitter” over their husbands’ lack of interest in an artificial insemination by donor procedure, and eventually obtaining their probably not-too-enthusiastic consent.⁷

F.M.: Allow me to return to speculative fiction, for a moment. Atwood, Rogers, Sedgwick, Erdrich and Zumas imagine worlds on the brink of destruction: their bleak, impoverished, post-catastrophic futures are clearly recognizable as the uncannily protracted aftermaths of our own age. Their novels leave no room for progress, or for new forms of compassion and care, across and between species. Instead, ART is imagined as a bio-political nightmare. When I read these novels, I find them anxiously resonant with the vast transnational pressures of accelerating globalization, in the present: political, military and economic interests that operate on a planetary scale, weapons of mass destruction, industrialization, irreparable environmental degradation, forced mass migration, genocidal wars, and so on. What seems largely absent, by contrast, is any genuine sense of alterity: a future that is imagined not in terms of eschatological closure, but as a state of protracted uncertainty. It seems to me, then, that these fictions are involuntarily complicit with the mentality that you deplore. They mark a missed opportunity. If we want to assess the vulnerability and value of human and nonhuman life on a warming planet, we must learn to consider both the climate emergency and ART as dynamic openings: as invitations to re-think our categories.

C.D.A.: The social characteristics of reproduction as a necessary prop of full adult social status explain why the narrative about reproduction has to be kept simple: because allowing for a wealth and multiplicity of different actors and of roles would dilute the social status accruing to parents and make it ultimately less desirable. If that status crumbled, people might no longer be willing to invest the extensive amount of resources which make successful reproduction possible in human societies. In my opinion, the artificially simplified and sanitized terms in which the debate about reproductive technologies is framed nowadays is just one more instance of the widespread, and dangerous, present-day propensity to desperately cling to simplistic, “traditional” narratives which are no longer adequate but which are useful to screen us from awareness of just how messy and complex things actually are. In this respect the invisibilization of the role people beyond the “social” parents play in ART is on a par with a number of other disingenuous and pernicious nostalgic narratives such as “Make America Great Again”, and of course with the various nationalisms and anti-immigration sentiments throughout Europe and the neo-Europes.⁸

F.M.: A more mature reflection on assisted reproductive technology, along the lines you suggest, would also have to account for the growing interconnectedness and inequalities brought about by global markets. So-called “reproductive tourism” has perpetuated and exacerbated social divides between and within nations. Our critical re-thinking of parenthood must be attentive to these phenomena, and to the inequalities and systemic violence that are

7 Rachel Bowlby, “How not to have children: early arguments about new reproductive technologies”, opening keynote lecture, Reproductive Health and Parental Responsibility, international conference, Roma Tre University, Rome, Italy, 23-24 April 2018. See also Bowlby 2003.

8 The term “Neo-Europes” was coined by historian and geographer Alfred Crosby (Crosby 1986) to refer to the extra-European areas which were not only colonized by Europeans, but which to this day are homes to large populations of European descent, such as the Americas and Australasia.

inscribed in the current global political and economic order.

C.D.A.: ART offer us an opportunity to rethink social categories, social relationships, and therefore processes of inclusion and exclusion. On a level, we are well aware of this: it is exactly because we are, and because this frightens us so much, that our reaction is to make all challenges to the traditional, simplistic narrative about parenthood (such as the genetic bond between egg or sperm “donors” and children, or the biological bond between children and “surrogate” mothers) not only socially, but legally invisible, and to uniformly choose to stick to the narratives we are already familiar with, even though they are no longer viable or helpful, but are, indeed, ridiculously inadequate to account for the facts.

F.M.: We need new narratives. I note how this basic claim has shaped our present discussion, as literary and cultural critics, about parenthood, ART and the climate crisis. All these phenomena demand new forms of linguistic and conceptual inventiveness that can alert readers to unfamiliar and counterintuitive scales. As ecocritic Timothy Clark has suggested, much environmental damage happens at a scale which cannot be fully expressed by traditional realist modes of literary representation (Clark 2019: 38). It is brought about by individual human actions that are not ecologically significant in themselves but that collectively, across space and over time, threaten much of what we value about humanity and the more-than-human world. If we apply Clark’s insight to the context of human reproduction, we observe that the relation between individual observable causes and vast global effects marks a stark challenge to traditional feminist accounts of agency: the personal is political, but it also resonates in planetary deep time. Cultural theorist Claire Colebrook has argued that the Anthropocene “requires us to open the classically feminist question of the *scale of the personal*: [...] is my personal sense of gender meaningful only in terms of the history of the human family, or in terms of the narrower history of bourgeois marriage, or might we say that the personal is geological?” (Colebrook 2017: 1-2, author’s italics).

C.D.A.: On a different but related topic, it might be interesting to note that the distinction between genetic and social parents is in a way analogous to a number of other distinctions which are becoming more and more important in contemporary cultural discourse, and which invariably pit biology against social construction. An obvious example is the distinction between sex and gender, and its significance for gender studies and queer theory. To my mind this analogy is a potentially interesting and productive one precisely because of the ways it does *not* work. While in the sex/gender equation the biological component is used as a means of coercion, to “naturalize” what is a purely cultural connection between anatomy and social performance, in the genetic parents/social parents equation the social component is used to discursively marginalize and repress the significance of the biological one, as is obvious in the whole debate about donors and surrogates. I believe this is an excellent occasion to start questioning the analytically naïve and politically risky notion that there is something *inherently* theoretically shrewd and politically progressive about privileging the socially constructed above the biological: each situation is different, each deserves to be analyzed on its own terms, each may lead us to different, even to unsettling, conclusions.

F.M.: The success of concerted efforts to re-think parenthood depends on our ability to express and relate different scales and points of view?

C.D.A.: We also need to pay attention to changing historical and cultural contexts. As to the social viability of the opening up of parenthood to a larger number of actors, it might be interesting to mention in passing that in the history of the West our narrow construction of parenthood

has been questioned, for instance, by the XVIII-century institution of “cicisbei”, the young aristocratic men who befriended the young wives of older aristocrats and in many cases were known to all to be the biological fathers of the children of the couple, a fact that nobody found shocking (Bizzochi 2008). Our present-day anxiety about the dissolution of traditional simplistic constructions of parenthood, and about the possible emergence of new social categories (“donor” mother, “surrogate” mother and “social” mother; “donor” father and “social” father, aunt/grandmother+”surrogate” mother, friend of the family+”donor” father, and so on...) is in my opinion one of the reasons why art (literature, film, performances, installations, you name it...) continues to pick at this sore. A brilliant Italian literary theorist, who would deserve to be more widely known abroad, Francesco Orlando, maintained that art is a form of the return of the repressed (Orlando1965). If you are not comfortable with this Freudian definition, I can offer you an updated queer one: art is about anxiety about emerging and liminal constructions of identity categories and their properties. Hard cases make bad law, but they make good art.

F.M.: I find both definitions of the artistic very illuminating: Francesco Orlando’s and yours.

C.D.A.: If we are willing to take a good hard look at what actually happens, as opposed to what is supposed to happen, in assisted reproduction we will get a sense of the irrepressible proliferation of “hard cases”; how messy this tangle of physiology, technology, emotions, and social relations can become, and of how unpredictable, and ultimately insoluble, this mess is. A lot of what we are used to taking for granted as “good practices” in surrogacy is designed to keep the mess at bay; for example, it is widely known that the form of surrogacy doctors like the least is the one between sisters because it creates lots of what the doctors define as “problems”, and that I, as a queer scholar, would instead define as the collapse of the neat repressive compartments which are supposed to keep social categories neatly apart.

F.M.: Why does the collapse of these pigeonholes cause so much anxiety?

C.D.A.: Because the way social categories work is predicated on neat compartments, while life is messy, and the messiness of life is exactly what culture is supposed to keep at bay. Surrogacy necessarily makes things messier because the neat social construction of parenthood is complicated by a proliferation of actors most of whom are then edited out of the story. And the reason why this happens is that we need to cling to a normative narrative even when the narrative is clearly inadequate to make sense of the facts, because the only roles we know how to play, and which therefore do not fill us with unmanageable anxiety, are the roles provided to us by the normative narrative. As a queer scholar, I tend to find messiness much more interesting than neatness, both theoretically, existentially, and politically. Therefore my practical, indeed political, recommendation is: by all means, keep the babies coming, but do not edit their three mothers, two fathers and mother-aunts or mother-grandmothers out of their lives, or of our society, or of our culture.

F.M.: Until now, our conversation has focused on the concept of parenthood and on the notion of “parental responsibility”. I suggest that we shift our attention to the debate about reproductive rights.

C.D.A.: Please note that I am not interested in analysing the merits of a given discourse, but only in how the discourse turns to be one that we can formulate, and what the consequences of formulating it are. Do we have a right to bring into the world a being fully equivalent to us, another human? This is philosophically far from clear, since in this way a being who is by

definition equivalent to us would end up being ontologically subordinate to us, owing her very being to us. This to me is a form of ontological hubris: being the cause of the existence of, and therefore ontologically superordinate to, a being in every way equivalent to us. It should be noted that this philosophical problem owes its existence to a very recent, and still not very widespread on a global scale beyond WEIRD societies, reconceptualization of parenthood. The ontological subordination of children to parents, particularly to fathers, was an unquestioned assumption for most of human history, in most societies (certainly in all the ones I personally have ever heard of), where parents, more specifically fathers, had *patria potestas*, which in traditional Roman law for instance included the power of life and death over offspring, who were in this respect indistinguishable from slaves. The very existence in all cultures of such a thing as anthropopoietic processes⁹ shows that human newborns are not considered fully human, but must be made so by a long and often gruesome itinerary. It was only very recently that in WEIRD legal discourse *patria potestas* has been replaced first by parental *potestas* shared by both parents, and then by that radically novel concept, parental *responsibility*.

F.M.: In a recent exchange with anti-natalist philosopher David Benatar, bioethicist David Wasserman has offered what he calls “a piecemeal defense of procreation” (Benatar and Wasserman 2015: 257). While Benatar regards any form of human procreation as morally unjustifiable, Wasserman holds that there can be no categorical argument against human reproduction. But he shares Benatar’s suspicion of those who argue that procreation – in all or most circumstances – requires no defence. In this context, Wasserman also rejects the idea of so-called “procreative liberty”, and suggests that liberal moral-political theory, with its traditional focus on the abstract, interchangeable, autonomous individual, is not an appropriate context for debates about procreation. Your own critique of the idea of procreative rights appears to strike a similar chord.

C.D.A.: I believe we should face the unsettling but ultimately inevitable realization that our present-day notion of “having a right to children” is incompatible with the equally present-day ubiquitous abhorrence of *patria potestas*. Either children are a right we can demand (which they could very well be, as long as our relationship to them was framed in the terms of *patria potestas*), or they are autonomous beings whose welfare we are responsible for (as they are now that we conceive of our relationship to them as parental *responsibility*); they cannot logically be both. For instance, health care is (at least for the time being...) a right, and therefore the personal preferences of medical personnel are not taken into account when it comes to caring for patients; indeed, the notion that they might be is intrinsically abhorrent. Patients, on the other hand, are autonomous beings health practitioners are responsible for and to, and therefore medical personnel are obliged to take their wishes, preferences, and values into account every step of the way.

F.M.: So would you agree that it is productive to imagine parenthood, first and foremost, as a practice of responsible care?

C.D.A.: I am interested in exploring how progress in ART, and the consequent reconceptualization of “parental responsibility” might make visible some hitherto unanticipated,

⁹ See Geertz 1965. Italian anthropologist Francesco Remotti has explored the implications of this fascinating issue in his important work on anthropopoiesis (Remotti 2013). Foucault’s concept of “subjectivation” (Foucault 1982) is also of clear relevance, but has not, until now, been the object of systematic study, in this context.

but potentially interesting, possibilities for the application of the concept. Our conversation is inspired by a conference that was jointly hosted by Roma Tre University and University College London, in April 2018: “Reproductive Health and Parental Responsibility”.¹⁰ This juxtaposition of terms assumes a connection between reproductive health and parental responsibility, which has inspired my interest. I contend that “reproductive health”, in the context of our debate, is first and foremost the health of the offspring; and “parental responsibility” is about keeping the offspring in good health, and ensuring that no offspring is produced where this is not feasible. This, after all, was the gist of O’Neill influential definition, which you quoted at the beginning of our conversation. I would like to suggest a further development, and I believe it would make sense to start by analysing the two words which make up the phrase “parental responsibility”.

F.M.: Please carry on.

C.D.A.: Who is a parent? To whom? Obviously, the recent developments in the legal conceptualization of parenthood point to this: a parent is whoever ultimately causes a life to be brought into the world; if it is possible, on the one hand, to conceive as a sterile couple hiring the services of donors and surrogates to be the child’s parents when she is born, and, on the other hand, to maintain that the donors and surrogates are not the child’s parents, it is evident that the *only* legally meaningful condition for being a parent is being the first link in the causal chain which ultimately leads to the creation of a life. If we subscribe to this definition, I think it might be interesting to consider that most of the lives we cause to be brought into the world are not human. If it were not for us, so-called farm animals would never reproduce, not least because we have bred them in order to maximize anatomical traits which now make it impossible for them to have sex, so that in order, for example, to get more turkeys, we have to resort to artificial insemination.¹¹ Thus, in a way, we are the parents of these billions of creatures we bring into the world, raise and slaughter every year (in most cases actually every few weeks) only to breed more who will share the same fate.

F.M.: This is a powerful provocation. Your suggestion resonates with the demands of leading posthumanist thinkers, and pioneers a new understanding of care, in line with the political trajectories that we examined in our conversation. There is more to explore, I suspect, than

10 The interdisciplinary conference was supported by the UCL Cities Partnerships Programme in Rome. Speakers included philosophers Roberto Mordacci, Loredana Persampieri and James Wilson, bioscientists Aarathi Prasad and Helen O’Neill, artist Zoe Papadopoulou, and literary scholars Rachel Bowlby, Simona Corso, Carmen Dell’Aversano and Florian Mussgnug.

11 This is how the process unfolds: “Although most turkey processing operations have been industrialized, the process of insemination must be done by hand. First, semen is collected by picking up a tom by its legs and one wing and locking it to a bench with rubber clamps, rear facing upward. The copulatory organs are stimulated by stroking the tail feathers and back; the vent is squeezed; and semen is collected with an aspirator, a glass tube that vacuums it in. The semen is then combined with ‘extenders’ that include antibiotics and a saline solution to give more control over the inseminating dose. A syringe is filled, taken to the henhouse, and inserted into the artificial insemination machine. A worker grabs a hen’s legs, crosses them, and holds the hen with one hand. With the other hand the worker wipes the hen’s backside and pushes up her tail. Pressure is applied to her abdomen, which causes the cloaca to evert and the oviduct to protrude. A tube is inserted into the vent, and the semen is injected.” (Madrigal 2013). Observer 1994 offers a first-person account of what the process actually implies from the workers’ perspective: “The insemination crew did 2 houses a day—6000 hens a day. Figuring a 10-hour day, that’s 600 hens per hour, ten a minute. Two breakers did 10 hens a minute, or each breaker “broke” 5 hens a minute—one hen every 12 seconds. This pace pressured the drivers to keep a steady flow of birds into the chute to supply the pit. Having been through this week after week, the birds feared the chute and bulked and huddled up. The drivers literally kicked them into the chute. The idea seemed to be to terrify at least one bird, who squawked, beat her wings in panic, and terrified the others in her group. In this way the drivers created such pain and terror behind the birds that it forced them to plunge ahead to the pain and terror they knew to be in the chute and pit ahead.”

we can cover on this occasion.¹² But I would like to flag two recent interventions which I think might guide further discussion. Rosi Braidotti has argued for a post-anthropocentric turn in activism and political theory, and has described this as potentially the most important legacy of feminist, queer, antiracist, ecological and postcolonial struggle (Braidotti 2017: 26-31). Similarly, Donna Haraway has called for new creative practices of multispecies kin making, which hold the power to “increase human multispecies wellbeing as means and not just ends, while radically reducing human demands and radically repairing damaged life worlds and places across the planet” (Haraway 2018: 98; see also Haraway 2016).

C.D.A.: At this point I would like to turn to “responsibility”. Responsibility is, of course, a Latin word. The English equivalent is “to be answerable for, to answer to”. This has two profound implications. The first is that responsibility arises in a relationship: we can never be responsible in the abstract: we are always responsible to someone for someone or something; in the case of legally sanctioned obligations like parental responsibility, to the law. The second is that our responsibility takes the form of “answering for” what we do or did not do: responsibility is expressed verbally in a dialogic relationship to whoever we are answerable to. These two implications have one important consequence: that unless social discourse makes it possible to articulate parental responsibility, to make it something we are called upon to answer for, parental responsibility does not exist. Of course, one major area in which parental responsibility does not exist at present is in relation to the over ten billions of creatures we cause to be born in order to eat their corpses. But since none of them would be born unless we, as consumers, literally had them manufactured to order, just like parents using donors and surrogates, it could be argued that we are, in a way, their parents. I believe the consequences of this application of the concept of “parental responsibility” to be deserving of further exploration.

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¹² For further discussion, see Mussgnug 2019.

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