32

**Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture**

**title:**

To Think the Unimaginable: Sarah Franklin in Conversation with Matylda Szewczyk, on Reproduction, Biology, Feminism, and Technology

**authors:**

Matylda Szewczyk, Sarah Franklin

**source:**

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 32 (2022)

**URL:**

https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2022/32-reproduction-tracks/to-think-the-unimaginable

**doi:**

https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2022.32.2519

**publisher:**

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

**affiliation:**

SWPS University

University of Warsaw

**keywords:**

reproduction; biology; feminism; technology

**abstract:**

Sarah Franklin in conversation with Matylda Szewczyk, on reproduction, biology, feminism, and technology.

**Matylda Szewczyk** - PhD. Assistant Professor at the Section For Film and Visual Culture in the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw. Her fields of research include media studies, film history and chosen practices of contemporary visual culture (especially relations between visual culture and science). She is interested in ways in which images both reflect and influence cultural changes and in liminal situations of visual culture: technological changes, media experiments and searching for new modes of expression. Fulbright researcher at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles (2008–2009). Author of W stronę wirtualności. Praktyki artystyczne kina współczesnego [Towards Virtuality. Artistic Practices of Contemporary Cinema, 2015], co-editor of Sztuka w kinie dokumentalnym [Art in Documentary Cinema, 2016] and Cięcie ciał. Ruchome obrazy (Cutting Bodies. Moving Images, 2018). Head of Section for Film and Visual Culture within the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw.

**Sarah Franklin** - Sarah Franklin is an American Anthropologist who currently holds the Chair of Sociology at the University of Cambridge. In 2012 she founded the Reproductive Sociology Research Group (ReproSoc) with funding from the Wellcome Trust, the British Academy and several other research organizations. Her work has contributed to feminist science studies, the new kinship studies, the social study of biomedicine and reproductive studies. Influenced by queer, gender and kinship theory, she has undertaken extensive research on changing understandings of reproductive cause and effect, as well as 'biological reasoning' and conception models. She is the author, co-author, editor and co-editor of more than a dozen books and over 200 other publications, including Embodied Progress (1997), Reproducing Reproduction (1998), Relative Values (2001), Remaking Life and Death (2003), Born and Made (2006), Dolly Mixtures (2007) and Biological Relatives (2013).

# To Think the Unimaginable: Sarah Franklin in Conversation with Matylda Szewczyk, on Reproduction, Biology, Feminism, and Technology

**Matylda Szewczyk:** I would like to start big and general: with the idea of "life itself" you wrote about, along with Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey, in your book *Global Nature, Global Culture*. To me it is uniquely related to the idea of fetal life, because so many feminist scholars, for example Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, Barbara Duden, Donna Haraway, and also yourself, have commented on fetal images as those celebrating "life," or even, using the exact phrase, "life itself."[1] So, this idea seems to me very closely connected to the idea of reproduction.

**Sarah Franklin:** The word "biology" has two quite different meanings. It means everything you might consider to be biological – everything you might consider to be alive, as well as maybe yourself as a living organism… and in this sense it means "life itself." But at another level biology means something much more specific: it means biological science. It means the knowledge system that is organized *to describe* the biological. So, you have something biological – let's say an insect – and then you have the biological understanding of an insect, which has a very clear, disciplined organization. When Foucault used the term "life itself" in a very technical way in the 1960s, when he was writing about the emergence of modern, biological sciences in *Les Mots et Les Choses*, he was really talking about the knowledge system, not about beetles. He was talking about what Darwin thought about beetles and why Darwin's theory of beetles was so important to the discipline of biology. And he said there was a shift from what he called a "table view" of beetles – all the beetles spread out on the table, the beetle with purple wings and the beetle with big eyes or whatever – to the genealogical model

of the beetle – that the beetle used to be something else, and that it evolved.

Foucault says that Darwin's genealogical model of the living entity is the foundation for modern biology, because it unifies all of modern biology into a single system that is based on the idea of genealogical evolution over time. And then, he says that that kind of architecture of the biological sciences comes to play a very specific role in modernity, because it becomes very managerial, because it is a way to manage the population. So, for him, the idea of "life itself," the idea of the modern biological sciences, is completely linked to the idea of the modern human being, which is linked to the idea of the modern human population, which is linked to the emergence of the nation state, because the nation state can manage the population, and arguably the management of the population is the whole point of the nation state. That is what he is talking about.

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Of course, when Rosalind Petchesky is writing about the fetal image, she *is* writing about biology, but she is writing about it in a very different way. Because she is writing about how the Moral Majority in the United States, the right-wing organization that began in the late 1970s, started using a *biological* argument about the fetus in order to be more successful in promoting a *religious* view of life.[2] And the religious view of "life itself" is completely different from the biological view of "life itself." The religious view of life is the Catholic view of life, the Christian view of life – that life is faith. "To have life" is to


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believe in the salvation of the human through the sacrifice of the Son of God. It is completely different from what "life itself" means in the secular model.

And then you have Barbara Duden, who makes a similar argument about the *sacralization of life*, which is yet another idea.[3] Other people, such as Hannah Landecker, have written about the link between the cinema, the moving image, and ideas of life.[4] So, I guess, for me the importance of "life itself" is both a scholarly question, in terms of which version you mean, and a political question: how are the ideas of life being used? Who is using them? What are they using them for? What is the grammar of the life system that they are talking about?

**MSz.:** But it is very often combined: even when the discourse is religious, it often has this biological, *quasi*-scientific dimension to it, like in the pro-life movement, where scientific arguments are used to support religious statements. And sometimes it is the other way round: the biological, evolutionary process is sacralized and Nature is deified, as in the writings of Ernst Haeckel. As a result, in popular discourses fetal life is sacralized on so many levels, so that it gains more importance than the life of a woman.

**SF:** Yes, you're exactly right about that. Even Darwin chose the tree as an analogy for life because it has a religious background, so it made his theories much more palatable. He could talk about evolution using a tree, which is a very religious and European image.

**MSz:** It is also considered beautiful.

**SF:** Yes, that's very true. It is a uniquely powerful aesthetic form. One of the earliest modernist abstract paintings, by Paul Klee, is of a tree... and the key question for feminism, as well as decolonialism, is always how these representations,

or figurations, of life or genealogy are being used to mobilize or stabilize particular points of view. The idea that they are not political, that they are just neutral, was one of the things that feminists have always been very rightly critical of. "Oh, it's just a fact that it has DNA," you know, is never just a fact. It is always a fact that belongs to a particular order.

**MSz:** Since you have mentioned DNA – as a concept, as an idea, DNA is very important. In *Spheres of Life*, you were analyzing the film *Jurassic Park* with regard to what you have called a "genetic imaginary."[5] I was wondering – do you see any link between the historical emergence of genetic imaginary and the digital revolution in cinema? "Genetical" and "digital" revolutions are often juxtaposed in many ways, symbolically (because in both cases the notion of "information" gains special importance) and practically, as they both make great use of computer technologies. How do you see this connection from your perspective?

**SF**: I think that this was also what Ros Petchesky was pointing to when she analyzed the film – *The Silent Scream*[6] – and also when she emphasized the very deliberate decision by the Moral Majority and pro-life activists in the United States to switch to a biological idiom. She said it was a very deliberate switch, both because it is a more effective idiom for a secular audience and also very mediagenic. It created an interface with mass media that could be exploited, and that has been very true ever since. The use of very evocative visual imagery by pro-life campaigners is absolutely vital to their strategy. And this has been an issue for the opposition, for reproductive justice movements, to find a visual language that is equally powerful. Because it is not necessarily easy to show the vitality of a full social life in a single visual image, the way you can with the fetal image of a purely "biological" life. And of course those fetal images are very complicated because they often use a dead fetus, and that irony

also characterizes the politics of the pro-life movement, because so much of what they do is completely contradictory. They want women to be forced to have children, but then they don't want a welfare state that will help to look after the children once they are born. They don't want to look after the women once they have the children. So, it is a very selective idea of life.

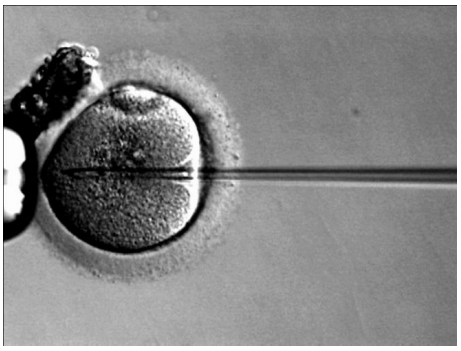
**MSz:** Since we have started talking about images, I would like to move to the issue of images within the experience of pregnancy. A lot has been said about the medicalized pregnancy as a very "visual" state, because you get to see all those images of fetuses, in guidebooks or – in the case of sonography – images of your own fetus. So, my question is, to what extent is the contemporary experience of pregnancy in the UK visualized? Do you think it changes or that it will change with time?

**SF:** It definitely is much more visual now, and clinics have actually started to make more use of 3D visual images of the sonogram. However, I think that the way in which those images are produced and consumed, and circulated, has changed a lot. The fact that a lot of people use these images to tell their friends on Facebook about their pregnancy, for example, means there is a kind of de-medicalization of the image. So, it does of course still have a lot of authority in the context of, let's say, a clinic, but those images now circulate so extensively outside the clinic, and are used in films and advertising, that they have become almost a kind of generic image of pregnancy. I think that it has made these images more open to a range of interpretations than when they were first introduced. Again, going back to Rosalind Petchesky and her article in 1987 about the fetal image,[7] part of the deliberate strategy to use the biological model and the visual model was that ultrasound was being introduced in clinics, and women were seeing "live" moving images of their unborn fetuses for the first time, and the idea from anti-abortion campaigners was that it would be much harder for a woman to

have an abortion when she saw her fetus. And it is even now mandated in some of the American states that a woman who is seeking a termination has to see an image of her fetus before she is allowed to have one. So, there has been an ongoing attempt to use that link – the emotional link – between seeing something and feeling an attachment, in the context of abortion politics. But there is also a way in which the very kind of immediacy of that image exceeds any one particular context, and it has now become part of popular culture to have those images in circulation. So, I think it has taken some of the power from those images, in terms of how they affect women, but they are still a very powerful form of surveillance, control, as well as of a more dispersed set of meanings.

**MSz:** Does this de-medicalization really take power away from the images? I am not sure if I agree with that. Firstly, sonography theorists like Janelle S. Taylor underline the fact that, as a medical technique, sonography was always a bit "nonmedical": the pleasurable aspect, the obvious fun of being able to "see the baby" before birth, was always there. It has always been present in the very "serious" medical uses of fetal sonograms, and it effectively enables the idea of "bonding" with the image.[8]

And secondly, when you stick the fetal images – the images of the fetus you are carrying – on your fridge, when you send them over to friends or even frame them, doesn't it create a fetal personhood that makes it so much harder when it turns out, for example for medical reasons, that you may want to consider abortion? It is often used against women who make pro-choice arguments: "But you yourself framed the photograph of your fetus and you called it 'a child,' so how can you even consider termination now?..."



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**SF:** You are right, those sorts of arguments are made often, and that is what you would call a kind of "symbolic literalism." "Look – it's a baby!" But it actually is not a literal statement – it is an ideological statement. It is one of the things visual culture always reminds us about: that facts are interpretations. When you are a scientist and you look at an image of an embryo, you don't think "Oh, there's an embryo," you think what type of image it is, how it was made, what it is showing us, what it is *not* showing us, how it is similar to other images... If you are a scientist, one of the things you know, for example, is that when you make an image of an embryo with a micro-manipulation machine, you have a very, very shallow depth of field. You can't really see the whole embryo: it is a very flat "slice" of an embryo. So, the only way you can get a sense of what the embryo looks like as a whole is to move the frame of the image up and down, and that is what embryologists do when they look at the embryo. They move the depth of field up and down in order to get a sense of what the entire embryo looks like. And usually, if you are an embryologist, you are looking for specific things. If you are an embryologist in an IVF lab, you are probably grading the embryo, you are probably deciding if it is suitable for embryo transfer. Does it look healthy? But actually, something that the embryologists in IVF labs now know is that just looking at an embryo doesn't necessary tell you very much. Because it can look really good, and neat and tidy, like it is developing properly, but not be good at all, because at least half the embryos you transfer do not successfully start a pregnancy.

I think the idea that you can just look at something and it is obvious is something people know isn't true. And when someone

tells them "Look – it's obviously a baby," they can say "But that's not the point." If someone is having a termination because they don't feel they can have a child, for whatever reason, it is not because they don't think they are pregnant. It's because they don't think the pregnancy is something they can support. The point of reproductive justice is that unless the woman is supported in making a decision that is right for her, she is not being supported – end of story.

**MSz:** This is just a side question, but when I read your books, I realize that you have been doing much interdisciplinary research: that you have been entering laboratories, you have been talking to scientists, you have to understand their work. Could you describe this aspect of your practice?

**SF:** I have worked alongside scientists and learned some basic techniques... I haven't been a major part of a lab, but as I tried to show in *Biological Relatives*, having someone explain something to you is one thing, but actually going into the lab and sitting down with them, and being present when they explain to you what they are doing with their hands, and how they are actually building a model of something, and manipulating it, and what they see when they look at that, is really, really fundamental.[9] In *Biological Relatives* I talk a lot about what Evelyn Fox Keller described as "the biological gaze," which is the combination of looking at something and building it at the same time.[10] I think it is really important to understand that way of understanding the biological, which is again quite different from saying "Oh, look, it's a biological entity, it has these features, therefore X." That is not actually a biological argument. A biological argument is actually very different from that; a biological argument would be almost opposite from that, which is what I was trying to show.

**MSz:** Coming back to reproductive medicine, there are many accounts of Western – sorry for the politicalized category

– feminists studying reproduction (for example Barbara Duden, who writes about USG) who reject prenatal testing because it destroys the original relation of women towards their pregnancy. The tests are also presented as medically ineffective, which supports the argument that the women don't really need them.[11]

To me these kinds of arguments seem to be quite far from the experience of many women from conservative countries, who actually have no access to various prenatal tests on political, religious, or moral grounds. If you manage to get such access, and the diagnosis is bad, you go abroad for the termination, because your own country does not provide it. So, maybe those accounts are quite one-sided. Is there something like a "feminist attitude" to prenatal testing?

**SF:** I think Rosalind Petchesky had a great answer to that question very early on, when she was writing about reproductive feminism and reproductive anthropologies in the 1980s. What does society have to provide in order for a woman to be seen as the most knowledgeable person to be making decisions about her own pregnancy? In order for that to be the case, women would need to be treated very differently – they would need to be treated as reliable decision-makers, they would have to be the subject of a lot more respect. They would have to have a lot more control over things like the medical system, as well as the political system and the state... and I mean there is obviously no right answer to how the technology is to be used, but there is definitely a right answer about what kind of status a woman needs to have in order to be the agent of her own decision-making. Because that is really a question about how women are treated within society as a whole.

In relation to Barbara Duden, I think it is a very partial perspective on the body that she introduces as a historian, and it is based on her own research on a very different time and ethos, when women's relationship to their body was what you would call

"haptic." It wasn't optic, it was haptic. It was what they felt. It was about their ability to act on a sense of connection to their own sensation of inhabiting their body. A different kind of body. That is obviously a really important perspective on what is happening in the context of, say, ultrasound, where a woman is being completely detached, physically, from her body, and having to imagine her body through technology that is being controlled by someone else. So, she probably just in some ways exaggerated the point. But that is often the case when you are making a difficult point, that you have to exaggerate it a bit.

**MSz:** I know. It is just too prescriptive for me. And it certainly refers to women who have that choice – who can afford medical prenatal testing, politically or economically.

**SF:** It is certainly one of the things that feminists have become a lot more sensitive about. That there is no one solution for all women on any of these issues... This is one of the big lessons from the UN Decade for Women, from 1975 to 1985, when it became obvious that even women who lived alongside each other in the same country had completely different ideas about what the best solution would be to marriage, poverty, the environment, or anything.

When I was in FINRRAGE [Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering] in the 1980s, one of the very contentious subjects for feminists in that organization was the exception to the ban on amniocentesis in the state of Maharashtra in India, due to the Union Carbide accident in Bhopal.[12] It was the very strong view of the Indian feminist group, the Forum Against the Oppression of Women, based in what was then Bombay, that it was essential for the women of Bhopal to have the choice to have amniocentesis and ultrasound or whatever else they wanted to manage their pregnancies, so that they wouldn't have to spend the rest of their lives bearing the burdens imposed by a US corporation that had

acted with such extraordinary negligence. Criminal negligence. So, that was a very strong argument for the opposite principal, the principal that you are describing – that access to testing, and use of the testing to make selective termination, was essential. Which is the opposite of what Barbara Duden is saying when she talks about how totally alienating it is for women to have an ultrasound and to have their fetus shown onscreen.

**MSz:** Let us dwell on the topic of technology... In your book *Biological Relatives*, you wrote that "the increasing control over biological reproduction 'artificially' is one of the major technological advances of the twentieth century."[13] Why is it so important?

**SF:** One of the main arguments of *Biological Relatives* is that it is possibly underestimated how important the combination of increasing reproductive control and also increasing ability to visualize reproduction is to our understanding of ourselves and our world. That is putting it in very broad terms, but I do think that is the case, and I think from an anthropological point of view it makes a lot of sense – that the technologization of reproduction isn't just about a new kind of engineering capacity: like we can now make a chimera out of a sheep and a goat, or we can now clone animals, and so forth. Those capacities are also highly symbolic. They are meaningful signs. And that is what I was also arguing in *Global Nature, Global Culture*, that when we see the image of the Blue Marble or of the unborn fetus, we are not just seeing an image of a thing, we are seeing *a symbol of a capacity* and we are seeing a *metaphor for a condition*. Which is why people have argued that the image of the Blue Marble and the image of the fetus are two of the most iconic images of the 20th century, because they represent a changing consciousness.
I think that is very true of IVF, particularly of the image of microinjection. I think that the ability to visualize microinjection is a very powerful metaphor for a condition of being in such an

intimate and uncertain relationship to technological capacity, technological control, of having so much technological power and precision. So much of a question about where that takes us in the future.

And so, I do think that although in vitro fertilization is often thought of as technique that is used for a relatively small group of people who have problems having children, in fact, in the larger context of post-war developmental biology, genetics, and reproductive biology, it is a much more powerful idiom, through which the human condition is understood. And there isn't one understanding of what that means, but I think that the full cultural implications of assisted conception have been underestimated.

**MSz:** You have argued that IVF changes our idea of kinship. I was curious about that, because, in accounts of people who had IVF, I have read a similar argument – that they believe the concept of the family is outdated[14]; but just by reading their accounts, I thought that in vitro did not change that much in the general idea of family and kinship – it has just rendered it more complicated than within a nuclear family, with a father, a mother, and their children. Now we may have a biological mother and father, donor mother and father, maybe two sets of social parents (like within an example of a non-heteronormative family, where children are biologically related to just one woman and just one man, but they are reared by two mothers and two fathers...). But the general, "classical," structuralist idea of "exchange" – of creating and connecting groups – remains intact. On the other hand, the change might be seen in the idea of our biological relations to other species, and, again, women's responsibility for the continuation of our species or maybe even "life itself."

**SF:** I think what is happening at the moment is quite interesting, because the way IVF imitates a biological process is also a very

undoing gesture: it undoes the fixity of the biological, it undoes the fixity of sexuality, of gender, of fertility… it opens up all of these naturalized concepts to a much more explicit, artificial aesthetic. And I do think there is a direct parallel in some way with queer time, queer people, queer movements, queer families. What I call "transbiology" is a way in which the biological cannot have the same kind of "Look – it's a baby!" literalism that it did in the past, once it is opened up to a much more explicitly artificial element. And I think what we are seeing now in relation to what you are saying about women being responsible for the future of the species is an undoing of parts of that connection. We are seeing an unraveling of the category of "women," so it is no longer tied to such a narrow, biological model. We are seeing dramatic changes in reproduction in terms of who is reproducing, and how they are reproducing… From a classic Lévi-Straussian, structuralist anthropological point of view, both the assumption that women are so important because they reproduce, and the assumption that reproduction is so important because it is a biologically very special activity, are undergoing a very significant change right now. And I think that will continue to happen.

I think this is partly why there is so much anxiety about gender at the moment: it is because these changes are happening very quickly. When I was growing up, 90% of the population thought gay people shouldn't even teach in schools. Now, among my students, it is completely normal to use pronouns, and they introduce themselves: "Hi, I'm Jamie, he/they, I'm in Pembroke College." It is completely normal for the entire idea of a fixed gender to be considered to be a point of view.

What has changed after Judith Butler and *Gender Trouble* is the consciousness of an entire generation. Judith Butler came and spoke in Cambridge a couple of years ago, and I was riding on a train with her back to London, and I was like "You know, you've helped to change the consciousness of an entire

generation about what gender is."

**MSz:** But what is the role of technology within this? What you are describing are social changes. I would like to recall Shulamith Firestone, who is also important in your writings. At the beginning of the 70s, she remarked that new reproduction technologies may be used to support a very conservative model of reproduction or family, they may serve a conservative agenda: there are these infertile women, so let them have babies and normal families...[15]

**SF:** Shulamith Firestone was deeply influenced by Frederik Engels, and by the dialectical, materialist model of history. As a result, I think that one of the best ways to understand her work is as a theorist of *consciousness*. The opening lines of *The Dialectic of Sex* point to the fact that not believing in the category of woman can even be considered grounds to be certified as insane. And she starts with that important fact of *perception*, the dominant perception of the inescapability of the rigid gender binary. That is her starting point. So, she doesn't go on to say what Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis said twenty or thirty years later, she doesn't go on to say that gender is itself a technology. She doesn't make that argument. But, in a way, Gayle Rubin makes that link in 1975, when she is writing about Lévi-Strauss, when she introduces the concept of the *sex/gender system*.[16] Simone de Beauvoir was very familiar with structuralist anthropology when she was writing *The Second Sex*, fifteen years before Shulamith Firestone... and just as Shulamith Firestone said: no amount of new technology will liberate women, as long as you are in a patriarchal society, where you are being defined as having these very specific kinds of roles. I think she was absolutely right about that.

Judith Butler developed all of these arguments in *Gender Trouble*, which was published in 1990, and since then, and in no small part because of that book, gender is increasingly

understood as a strategic, tactical, acquired, constructed, and artificial assignment. This is such an important understanding of gender, a technological understanding of gender. And that is where I think technology has a more revolutionary role. Not the one that Shulamith Firestone ascribed to it, but yes: understanding gender as a technology of life is absolutely right. It is a tactical means of existence. It is organized, just as any other part of society is organized; it doesn't just happen, it is organized to be in a certain way.

**MSz:** It may be true that Judith Butler changed the consciousness in this very quick way… but what is done quickly can be undone just as fast, especially in such an unstable world like ours has currently become. Let us think, for example, about the refugee crisis. The discourse of "women and children," of "unborn children," the strict gender division, the religious allegories: they all come back, and you have to work with that, and you quickly learn to get along with that, because it can be politically useful.

**SF:** It is often the case, especially with political coalitions, that you are going to be working with people who don't entirely have the same politics as you do, and there is not really any solution to that, there is just a process – which is keeping a dialogue going, and continuing to point out the connections between the things that need to be linked together. I thought it was interesting what the Pope said recently, about people who are not having children… I don't know if you saw it?

**MSz:** That they are having pets instead?

**SF:** Yes, exactly, and he said this is a problem because they are losing out on the experience of motherhood and fatherhood. It was quite interesting that he said this, because people don't say things like that unless they are worried about something,

and obviously he is worried about falling fertility, perhaps especially in places like Italy, but he is obviously also worried about the changes affecting gender and the family. And what is interesting of course too is that a lot of people pointed out that he himself is not a father. Not a biological father. But the funny thing is that he *is* a father, in the Church. That is the expression the Church uses – the Holy Father. And the reason the Church uses that expression is because the role of the priest is seen to participate in divinity. Through ordination they become part of the family of God, and the house of God. And that is why they can be a shepherd or a father to their people. It is interesting, because procreation is seen to be one of the other ways that people can participate in divinity, as it is a Christian belief that the spark of divinity is what is communicated through procreation, which is why it has to be protected by the holy "container" of matrimony. And what the Pope was saying was that people should not be deprived of the roles of motherhood and fatherhood, but he was saying that as someone who is himself not a biological father, but someone who is a different kind of father; you might call it a "cultural fatherhood" or "religious fatherhood." And in his capacity as a father, as a caring, benevolent shepherd, he is expressing his concern. "It is because I care about my flock that I want you all to have babies."

It is one of those statements that sort of does, or "performs," the opposite of what it says. Because what it does is to show us that there are in fact many different ways to be a nurturing person, have a parenting role, and exercise care towards your family which are *not* about biology. That is exactly what he was doing. He was expressing care and protectiveness for his family as a father in a non-biological way. So, he was demonstrating exactly the value of non-biological fatherhood in claiming that biological fatherhood is so important. And that is a perfect example of the problem for a lot of family traditionalists and gender traditionalists and marriage traditionalists, because you

can't get more traditional than the Pope! And the Pope himself is making what Judith Butler would call "gender-performative statements" that undermine the very basis of "sex" as he is defining it. It was such a Judith Butler moment… Here we are, once again, dealing with biological paternity. You know, it has never been a very stable signifier. Most signifiers of fatherhood are non-biological: fathers of inventions, fathers in academia; we get the father of sociology, the father of anthropology; it is used all the time in philanthropy, it is used for all these male activities in business, academia, in law, in medicine. All these paternal idioms to do with knowledge, invention – they have nothing to do with biology at all.

So, this goes to show that even when family and gender traditionalists are trying to make these fundamental comments, fundamental instructions about parenthood, they are doing so in a way that demonstrates pretty much the reverse of what they are saying.

**MSz:** You are saying here that the performative discourse emerges within this very conservative one. But coming back to IVF it can be equally ambiguous, like we have said already… it can be "undoing," but it can also be treated as an oppressive tool to enforce fertility for a very high price – economical, physical, and psychological. On the other hand, in Poland, where there is this powerful influence of the Church in terms of legislation, many of the general public, feminists included, support women who decide to have IVF, and rightly so. One of the arguments that is often made is that we should believe in science, in scientific rationality, rather than in the Church's teaching. And that we should believe in biology…

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**SF:** It is interesting to think here about that really brilliant Polish feminist image, the red lightning strike, that so vividly says "don't start telling women what to do, because you are going to get into serious trouble." It is such a powerful image. It is an image of political solidarity, but it is also an image of a spark. I think that is how a lot of feminist politics are rightly imagined: as a kind of spark that brings about change – like you become a feminist because something happens, and you see the world really differently, and you start to understand it differently. It is a very powerful transformation. And it is also a little bit like the idea of planting a seed, where once you have one feminist idea you start to have others, and you start to organize and you start to bring about change. So, there are some very important similarities between a kind of affinity that you develop politically, and solidarity with other people who are struggling for similar goals, and the idea of family or kinship network or sisterhood… some kind of collective that has an identity, that is about its purpose and its constitution. You could think of the lightning strike as a kind of connection, a kind of shared substance that connects people. And it is just one example of how easily you can move from a very narrow biological idiom to something very similar that is not necessarily based on biology at all but has a lot of the same elements. The same ideas of being "essentially" a person who has a certain characteristic, or being someone who was born to become a certain way, or whatever. I just think it is worth reminding ourselves of that, because I think there will be a kind of de-biologization increasingly of gender, the family, kinship, and reproduction. And it is almost unimaginable to think

of non-biological reproduction; but of course, it is not really difficult to think about it at all.

**MSz:** But from what we said before, this de-biologization can be used, politically, in very different ways.

**SF:** And it is! The de-biologization of reproduction is used all the time politically. It is how parents and children get separated at the border of the United States; it is how some people's reproduction is very highly valued and other people's reproduction is completely negated. It is how entire groups of people are effectively targeted for de-population, for de-generation, for eradication. The whole white settler colonial project in many parts of the New World was about getting rid of the people who were there to begin with. And we have tons of examples of that, from eugenics, from fascism, from racism, and from slavery – from all of the ways that capitalism relies on an underclass of people whose lives don't matter. We are well aware of how biological life is sacralized and celebrated and worshipped in one context and yet completely denied and cut off and ignored in another. That is how it works. It works *because* it is selective.

**MSz:** The very last question: in relation to reproduction there is this obvious binary distinction between mother and father, two figures that are very differently constructed. Regarding social changes in contemporary reproduction, what, in your opinion, would be the fate of these constructs?

**SF:** That's a very good topic to end with, because I think that brings us to another very important question, which is: what are we learning from trans-activists? What are we learning from trans-feminism? And why is it important? And I think the ways in which maternity and paternity are being transformed in the context of trans-parenting, trans-reproduction,

trans-kinship, trans-families, is so important. Often the question about trans- is framed, quite rightly, in terms of supporting trans-people in the choices and decisions they make, and not demonizing trans-people as some sort of "threat to feminism," when of course we are still familiar with how lesbians were "threats to feminism," and black feminism was a "threat to feminism," and actually all those "threats to feminism" turned out to be absolutely vital in feminism being able to be feminist. And the same is true of trans-activism and parenting. We will have a much better understanding of how elastic, encompassing, and powerful parenting can be in a de-biologized mode when we understand better the full range of ways that parenting can be organized.

1 Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury, and Jackie Stacey, *Global Nature, Global Culture* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), 33–36.

2 Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman's Choice: The State, Sexuality, and Reproductive Freedom* (Boston: Northwestern University Press, 1990).

3 Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

4 See for example: Hannah Landecker, "The life of movement: From microcinematography to live-cell imaging," *Journal of Visual Culture* vol. 11, no. 3 (2012), 378–399.

5 Sarah Franklin, "Life Itself: Global Nature and the Genetic Imaginary," in: Franklin, Lury, and Stacey, *Global Nature, Global Culture*, 198–224.

6 Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, "Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction," *Feminist Studies* vol. 13, no. 2 (Summer 1987).

7 Ibid.

8 Janelle S. Taylor, *The Public Life of the Fetal Sonogram: Technology, Consumption, and the Politics of Reproduction* (New Brunswick–New Jersey–London: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

9 Sarah Franklin, *Biological Relatives: IVF, Stem Cells, and the Future of Kinship* (Durham

and London: Duke University Press, 2013).

10 Ibid., 279–281.

11 See, among others: Duden, *Disembodying Women*, 73–78.

12 The Bhopal disaster took place in 1984 at the Union Carbide India Limited facility in the Indian city of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, and is counted among the most tragic industrial disasters in history. A leak of methyl isocyanate from a storage tank caused the immediate death of thousands of people. Birth defects and miscarriages are included among the long-term health effects of the disaster. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhopal_disaster (accessed March 27, 2022).

13 Franklin, *Biological Relatives*, 14.

14 See for example: Karolina Domagalska, *Nie przeproszę, że urodziłam. Historie rodzin z in vitro* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015), 28.

15 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 197.

16 Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in: *Towards Anthropology*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press), 157–210.