

<http://somatosphere.net/2018/08/remaking-reproduction-conference-a-review.html>

Remaking Reproduction Conference: A Review

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By Risa Cromer and Lucy Van De Wiel

More than 150 scholars of reproduction descended upon an uncharacteristically sunny Cambridge in June 2018 to put reproduction at the center of social analysis at the *Remaking Reproduction: The Global Politics of Reproductive Technologies* conference. The Reproductive Sociology Research Group (ReproSoc), led by Professor Sarah Franklin at the University of Cambridge, organized the delivery of 90 papers, 4 plenary conversations with 9 senior scholars, a trans roundtable, a formal dinner, an art exhibition, a dance performance, and a film screening, all over two and a half incredible days at Murray Edwards College.

[#reprocnf](#) location couldn't have been more perfect
pic.twitter.com/1FDiRXJ8kG

— Hannah Gibson (@HannGibson86) [June 29, 2018](#)

Organizers reported overwhelming interest from scholars around the world in participating, which testifies to the flourishing interdisciplinary arena referred to at the conference as 'reproductive studies', a domain that crosscuts anthropology, sociology, history, biology, cultural studies, women's and gender studies, law, science & technology studies, and other fields.

In her opening remarks, Sarah Franklin set a tone of collegiality, engagement, and conviviality. Her invitations to play — from ways to use the purple and pink bandanas gifted to each attendee, to creative forms of seeing 'reproduction' for a photo contest — struck us as important on multiple levels. Play fosters scholarly collaborations and encourages the practice of imagining and doing differently, which, we were reminded during the conference, is critical to both remaking reproduction as well as counterbalancing an ethos of competition and scarcity instilled by neoliberal reforms in contemporary academia.

And just in case you were wondering what to do with your [#ReproCnf](#) bandana...

([#purplepoints](#) for anyone who sends us a picture of any other uses) pic.twitter.com/JtCietvI3j

— Repro Sociology (@ReproSoc) [June 27, 2018](#)

Six thematic streams (changing in/fertilities; making new biologies; mediated reproduction; race, nation, and reproduction; reproductive bodies and identities; and reproductive futures) provided conceptual frames for what proved to be a wide range of paper presentation topics.

At [#reprocnf](#) listening to [@ralmeling](#) talking about her new research into men and reproduction. Men not clear what their role is except as sperm providers.

— Kriss Fearon (@christabel6) [June 28, 2018](#)

Gay divorce. A new perspective on kinship in the age of ART. Great talk by Daphne Birenbaum-Carmeli. So many things to think about ?[@ReproSoc](#)? [#reprocnf](#) pic.twitter.com/UOGZrDLZW4

— Joyce Harper (@ProfJoyceHarper) [June 28, 2018](#)

[@IlkeTurkmendag](#) talking about patient views on genome editing and the potential of this tech for treating rare diseases [#reprocnf](#)

— CRR (@CRRDMU) [June 28, 2018](#)

Really great presentation by [@jennachealey](#) on the history of ovarian reserve and the meanings of the biological clock. [#ReproCnf](#)

— CRR (@CRRDMU) [June 28, 2018](#)

Other highlights for me today included [@eyatesd](#) on the resistance that is feeding and nourishing women in Guatemala; and [@rcromer](#) on the curious case of a family's uniquely "sick" frozen

embryo that enabled (maybe) a \$3m tax writeoff. [#reprocnf](#)

— sophie a. lewis (@reproutopia) [June 29, 2018](#)

consensus in the room that van de Wiel's theoretic, demystifying, muck-raking (politicised) approach to studying infertility capitalists (i.e. follow the money, uncover links between individual shareholders etc) should be a key part of any academic repro justice project [#reprocnf](#)

— sophie a. lewis (@reproutopia) [June 28, 2018](#)

Our respective projects contributed to a growing area of interest in reproductive studies on economics in the global fertility sector. Scholars of reproduction have paid close attention to the “uncanny hybridities of money, speculation, financialization, and in vitro tissues” (Cooper and Waldby 2014) within global tissue economies, which are often driven by desires to generate forms of value perceived to be latent within eggs and embryos. In a similar vein, Lucy van de Wiel’s work on egg freezing and embryo selection takes the financial practices steering the global fertility sector as an object of inquiry. She focuses on developments such as the platformization of reproductive health care and the increasing consolidation of fertility, pharmaceutical and medical device companies through mergers, acquisitions and strategic alliances. Her paper established a critical framework for conceptualizing the ‘speculative turn’ in IVF by analyzing the ongoing intertwinement of treatment and financial rationales. In doing so, she theorizes reproductive technologies in relation to the driving of logics of late capitalism.

Risa Cromer’s work on embryo donation illustrates how mundane and routine calculative practices also figure centrally in reproductive and regenerative technology sectors. Her paper recounted the story of a family in the United States who donated a diseased embryo to a biobank for stem cell research in hopes of establishing a cure for their sick daughter. She argued that the family’s personal income tax deduction for the estimated value of their frozen embryo ‘asset,’ which they filed to generate funds for their daughter’s care, functions as a banal, though no less speculative, financial instrument through which caring and curing become accounted for as reproductive labor.

As we saw in the works of others, studies of reproduction rarely adhere to the bounds of discrete domains. And yet we had a few conversations with

attendees who wondered if *they* were the outsiders at the conference or if their research addressed reproduction centrally enough to warrant their inclusion in the program. Plenary speaker Kim Tallbear noted that she does not identify as a scholar of reproduction yet often finds herself invited to engage with those who do. While determining where the lines of reproductive studies stop and start remains an open question, we came to see the collective body of work shared as productively disturbing the domaining of knowledge about reproduction. Such forms of thinking across and despite domains made for pre-, peri-, and post-panel conversations that encouraged conceptual cross-pollinations and thematic mutations of our very ideas about reproduction. This, we felt, captured the reason for convening.

Enlightening. We need to get social scientists. Basic scientists. Clinicians. Economists. Anthropologists. Psychologists. All working together to work on Fertility and IVF. ?@ReproSoc? #reprocnf pic.twitter.com/N3IIXU9DFk

— Joyce Harper (@ProfJoyceHarper) [June 27, 2018](#)

The plenary sessions took place as conversations rather than as a traditional sharing of recent research. Each speaker addressed the questions of *why reproduction*, *why now*, and *what's next*. They also traced their own professional journeys into the field and named their intellectual ancestors and teachers. Many named are responsible for a growing list of canonical works that helped to establish the field through enduring concepts like stratified reproduction (Colen 1995), moral pioneers (Rapp 1987), tentative pregnancy (Rothman 1986), hope technology (Franklin 1997), and ontological choreographies (Thompson 2005), among many others. These concepts offer analytical tools to understand reproductive practices as not simply the outcome of individual choices, but as embedded in broader social structures and constraints. In turn, at the heart of the conference was the effort to bring reproduction to the center of social analysis, by positioning it as a focus point for understanding intersecting inequalities through which our lived realities are construed.

Yes ?#reprocnf pic.twitter.com/GoSh7VWHws

— Leah Eades (@AnthropoLeah) [June 28, 2018](#)

References to feminist activism also proved important to reflections on how reproductive studies emerged and where it might go. Speakers talked

about the legacy of FINNRAGE (Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering), made critical calls to confront exclusionary feminisms, and paid homage to Sara Ahmed's work.

"What are we doing when we are asking people to justify their existence as though they are not even in the room"-Julian Honkasalo closes the Trans Roundtable at [#reprocnf](#) with a call to unpack and confront exclusionary feminisms

— Claire Horn (@clairemlhorn) [June 29, 2018](#)

Many plenary speakers shared the common experience of having received some form of discouragement from mentors, who were often otherwise supportive and feminist, about studying reproduction because, as they were told, it is marginal, unimportant, feminine, and unserious. By contrast, each found reproduction to be massively generative for thinking about broad issues concerning societal change and fundamental questions about human life, which arose from their wide-ranging scholarship on abortion and infertility, sperm cells and stem cells, mass migration and migra-politics, settler sexuality and sex work. Together, the plenary conversations positioned reproduction as a vital focal point for explaining pressing issues of migration, climate change, nationalism, religion, capital, social stratifications, colonialism, incarceration, occupation, etcetera. How can we *not* account for reproduction when analyzing the wider social order?

"Don't listen to the reproductive nay-sayers" inspiration for early stage repro researchers from Marcia Inhorn [#reprocnf](#)

— Claire Horn (@clairemlhorn) [June 27, 2018](#)

The centrality yet relative invisibility of reproduction within politics and theory remains a core conundrum for scholars of reproduction. Sarah Franklin shared an imaginative game that she plays when reading the *Financial Times*, which involves wondering what a version called *Fertility Times* might include. She offered two insights, which are: (1) there is likely no topic currently in the *Financial Times* (or any media dealing with 'real politics') that isn't related to reproduction in some way, and (2) our job as scholars and advocates is to make the centrality of reproduction within all politics much more explicit. She further called for centering reproduction within our roles in academic institutions by recognizing the university as a

kind of reproductive technology.

.@sbrooksfranklin opens by quoting Shulamith Firestone and by linking her remarks to the material workplace we're in: the university – as well as being an often downright violent place to work – is a reproductive technology [#reprocnf](#)

— sophie a. lewis (@reprotopia) [June 27, 2018](#)

This prompted a conversation about reproductive logics that structure the academy, such as enabling the reproduction of (certain) forms of knowledge and power, generating value from intellectual labor, and institutionalizing neoliberal forms of audit.

.@Menzwa: There is a valorization of “the genius.” But the making of “geniuses” happens through the invisibilization of other people’s labor. [#reprocnf](#)
And, once again, related to [#hautalk!](#)

— Luísa Reis Castro (@lureiscastro) [June 28, 2018](#)

Reference to the late winter strike led by employees at the University of Cambridge over reduced pensions based on actuarial predictions about life expectancy provided a poignant example of how fundamental ideas about reproduction are to the function and durability of powerful institutions. For feminists in academia, centering reproduction also provides an opportunity to critically interrogate our roles within universities.

Encouragement to imagine how pasts, presents, and futures could be ‘otherwise’ challenged attendees to consider where reproductive studies might go next. Many speakers called for (as well as modeled) more interdisciplinary and intergeneric approaches to reproduction in a global frame. As Andrea Whittaker put it, “We need new interdisciplinary mutations.”

Andrea Whittaker + Ayo Wahlberg argue for a broader and more interdisciplinary study of reproduction globally at [#reprocnf](#)
pic.twitter.com/h6pWYx7Ajx

— sarah franklin (@sbrooksfranklin) [June 28, 2018](#)

Others suggested that we take seriously the work of ‘world-making’—work that marginalized communities have long led. Following her remarks on the dangers of being too ‘realistic,’ Mwenza Blell called attendees to disrupt as well as create: “Please break out of just critiquing and break INTO some kind of creative future building along with other people in response to these problems and other problems you perceive. Engage in worldmaking in your work and in your life.”

Being “realistic” is dangerous to ourselves and others. Terrific keynote by [@Menzwa](#) [@ReproSoc](#) [#ReproCnf](#)
pic.twitter.com/jfTxWCIWfx

— Katie Hammond (@HammKatie) [June 28, 2018](#)

[.@Menzwa](#): Ethnography can challenge big things, big ideas, big people... But we should break out of solely critiquing and break in into future building. You don't have to do this world making alone... Actually, you shouldn't do this alone! [#reprocnf](#)

— Luísa Reis Castro (@lureiscastro) [June 28, 2018](#)

In a related vein, Kim Tallbear called for “unimagining settler relations,” which she described as an interlocking configuration of land theft, Christian monogamy, private property, and white supremacy. She and many others at the conference were actively imagining how, as well as trying, to make new stories out of ruins.

Shantel Ehrenberg performing at [@ReproSoc](#) [#reprocnf](#) on her experience of early menopause and not being able to become a biological mother. pic.twitter.com/sN8MAvPCNX

— Dr Christina Weis (@christina_weis) [June 28, 2018](#)

Dr Shantel Ehrenberg's performance was remarkable [#reprocnf](#)
Remaking Reproduction [@Cambridge_Uni](#)
pic.twitter.com/mkdgsgNKyc

— Dr Ilke Turkmendag (@IlkeTurkmendag) [June 28, 2018](#)

For example, Emily Yates-Doerr's paper on the making of nutrients as reproductive technologies in Guatemala presented the stories of an experimental farm in the 1950s and a contemporary organic farm as critical windows into moments of history that "do not throw away the present for a promised future."

Marcia Inhorn, Aditya Bharadwaj, Andrea Whittaker, Ayo Wahlberg, and others argued for greater attention to the formations and uses of reproductive technologies in the Global South. They also reminded scholars to not overlook 'low tech' technologies and innovations from below like Misoprostol and low-cost IVF.

Keynote Speaker Aditya Bharadwaj on his journey through the field of reproductive studies. He reminds us, as Inhorn mentioned yesterday: the silence about infertility in the "Global South" was connected to stereotypes of a "hyper fertile" and "overpopulated" South [#reprocnf](#)

— Luísa Reis Castro (@lureiscastro) [June 28, 2018](#)

[@ayo_wahlberg](#) Every country has a story for each reproductive technique or choice, a narrative about which pregnancies are wanted or unwanted, and what happens next. [#reprocnf](#)

— CRR (@CRRDMU) [June 28, 2018](#)

More exciting plenary talks at [#ReproCnf](#): Mwenza Blell calling for a resistance to the world making practices of disrespect and Aditya Bharadwaj for innovations from below for the advancement of reproductive justice. pic.twitter.com/8QfJvLyRyX

— Riikka Homanen (@HomanenRiikka) [June 28, 2018](#)

Sharmilla Rudrappa encouraged us to think big and see the unseen. Her recent work on bioeconomies within the contexts of food scarcity examines the hidden histories of famine in India that prompted multiple mass migrations/dislocations that undergird biopolitical anxieties about population. While population has long been a site for managing reproduction, she offered the frame of 'redistribution' for envisioning it differently.

It's not about population, it is about redistribution. One of the closing comment of [#reprocnf](#) by the fabulous Sharmila Rudrappa. [@ReproSoc](#)

— Noémie Merleau-Ponty (@NoemieM_P) [June 29, 2018](#)

In this spirit of imagining otherwise, and of making not only the personal but also the academic political, the conference integrated a number of public events that welcomed a wider audience to reflect on these issues. The first day ended with the opening of [Reproductivities](#), an exhibition of newly commissioned works that reimagine reproduction across human and plant divides. Curated by ReproSoc's Sarah Franklin and Lucy van de Wiel, the exhibition featured Camilla Lyon's paintings on the embodied experience of undergoing IVF and Gina Glover's photographic reimaginings of archival material taken from Bob Edwards, who was responsible for the birth of the first IVF baby Louise Brown, and from nearby Bourn Hall, the world's first IVF clinic that he founded. With a separate display of reproduction-themed works from the permanent collection, the exhibition moreover called attention to the college's extraordinary [New Hall Art Collection](#), which is Europe's largest collection of women's art and features works by renowned artists including Judy Chicago, Tracey Emin, Mary Kelly and Helen Chadwick.

Echoing the academic calls for interdisciplinary mutations and creative world-making, the exhibition opening included a tour led by Sarah Franklin to a cornfield in the college gardens, which was planted as part of the *Reproductivities* exhibition. Here she spoke passionately about corn as a model organism requiring interspecies assistance to reproduce. Directing our attention to the three-stalked "mutant" corn growing in the field, she encouraged us to consider how thinking about reproduction (and related processes of selection, routinization, cultivation, inheritance, etc.) through species like corn or fish might inspire new frames of understanding. Alternative models, concepts, and imaginaries about reproduction can inform approaches to doing otherwise.

Prof Sarah Franklin waxing lyrical about corn, unique & fascinating for its reproductive & genetic behaviours [#Reprosoc](#) [#ReproCnf](#)
pic.twitter.com/XiPPrGP1SD

— Katy Barbier-Greenland (@KatyBeeGreen) [June 27, 2018](#)

Bringing together feminist scholarship and praxis, the conference closed

with a film screening of [Vessel](#), a feature documentary chronicling the work of the Dutch pro-choice organization [Women on Waves](#), which provides medical abortion to women in countries where the procedure is illegal or inaccessible—both by telemedicine and by sailing women into interterritorial waters, where the laws of the flagship country apply. Rebecca Gomperts, the founder Women on Waves and subject of the film, joined the screening and offered a lively Q&A afterward, in which she presented the different vessels they have since used in more recent campaigns, including abortion trains, drones, and robots. Specifically in relation to reproductive technologies, she suggested scholars could explore the possibilities of women appropriating fertility treatments with a do-it-yourself ethos, as an alternative to an increasingly for-profit logics driving the fertility industry. Reflecting on her statement in the film that women can now self-manage their abortions with [Misoprostol and Mifepristone](#) regardless of local laws, she argued that it remains important to continue the fight for changing legislation. As long as abortion remains in the criminal code, she concluded, there will be many who cannot access an abortion and, because this disproportionately affects poor and marginalized people, social injustices will remain.

The film screening of Vessel, which traces the work of Women on Waves, was the most inspiring and life giving example of feminist activism that I have ever seen. Thank you! [#ReproCnf](#) [@ReproSoc](#)

— Natali Valdez (@anthro919) [June 30, 2018](#)

WELL i think literally everyone in the kaetsu centre is in love with Rebecca Gomperts & her [@WomenOnWaves](#) [@abortionpil](#) comrades having watched Vessel the movie as the glorious finale of [#reprocnf](#). Right now this phenomenal reprovolutionary is filling us in on the last 5 years.

— sophie a. lewis (@reprotopia) [June 29, 2018](#)

A heartfelt thanks to [@sbrooksfranklin](#) and the amazing team [@reprosoc](#) for a fantastic conference! Highlight was meeting [@rebeccagomperts](#), founder of [@WomenOnWaves](#). If you're in need of some inspiration in these dark times, watch "Vessel," a doc film about her efforts. [#reprocnf](#)

— Rene Almeling (@ralmeling) [June 30, 2018](#)

With Gomperts' call to justice, the final session tied up the thread running through the conference that linked reproductive practices and wider socio-political realities. *Remaking Reproduction* expressed a commitment to doing risky and critically-engaged work in order to conceptualize the myriad social realities that intersect in, and become differently legible through, technologized reproduction. This conference signified a moment in which the field of reproductive studies moves towards an intersectional, interdisciplinary, and experimental approach in which reproduction functions as a lens for understanding the broader social order.

After three intense days at [@ReproSoc](#)'s Conference learning about reproduction (of babies, social orders, hierarchies, economic systems...) I wonder: How can we make all these ideas matter beyond academia and towards needed political interventions? [#Reprocnf](#)

— Sara LF (@SaraLF) [June 30, 2018](#)

Links

- [Remaking Reproduction](#)
- [Reproductive Sociology Research Group \(ReproSoc\)](#)
- [Life in Glass](#) – ReproSoc's public engagement project
- [Reproduction Interviews](#) – ReproSoc Youtube Channel
 - Mary Beard
 - Marilyn Strathern
 - Jack Halberstam
 - Nick Hopwood
- [New Hall Art Collection](#)
- [Murray Edwards College](#), University of Cambridge

[Risa Cromer](#) is a postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University in the Thinking Matters program and Center for Biomedical Ethics. She will join the Purdue University faculty next year as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology. Her research examines medical, religious, and market forms of valuation within reproductive medicine. She has also co-published with interdisciplinary colleagues in *Veteran Affairs on mental health, patient-centered care, and pain*. Her current book project, *Saving: The Afterlives of Frozen Embryos*, draws on ethnographic fieldwork with

'embryo adoption' proponents and participants in the United States.

[Lucy van de Wiel](#) is a Research Associate at the Reproductive Sociology Research Group (ReproSoc) at the University of Cambridge. For the next three years, she will lead the 'Extending In/Fertilities' network within ReproSoc's Wellcome-funded Changing Infertilities collaborative research project starting in September 2018. Her research focuses on egg freezing and the gender politics of ageing; the datafication of reproduction through the introduction of new data technologies in IVF; and the political economy of contemporary assisted reproduction. Alongside her research, she currently coordinates the Wellcome-funded [Life in Glass](#) public engagement project within ReproSoc, which includes the development of *Dish Life*, a mobile game app about stem cells, *Reproductivities*, an art exhibition about plant and human reproduction at Murray Edwards College, and *Timeless*, a fictional pop-up shop that was installed at the world's largest fertility trade shows. Her current book project is called *Freezing Fertility: Oocyte Cryopreservation and the Gender Politics of Reproductive Ageing*.

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