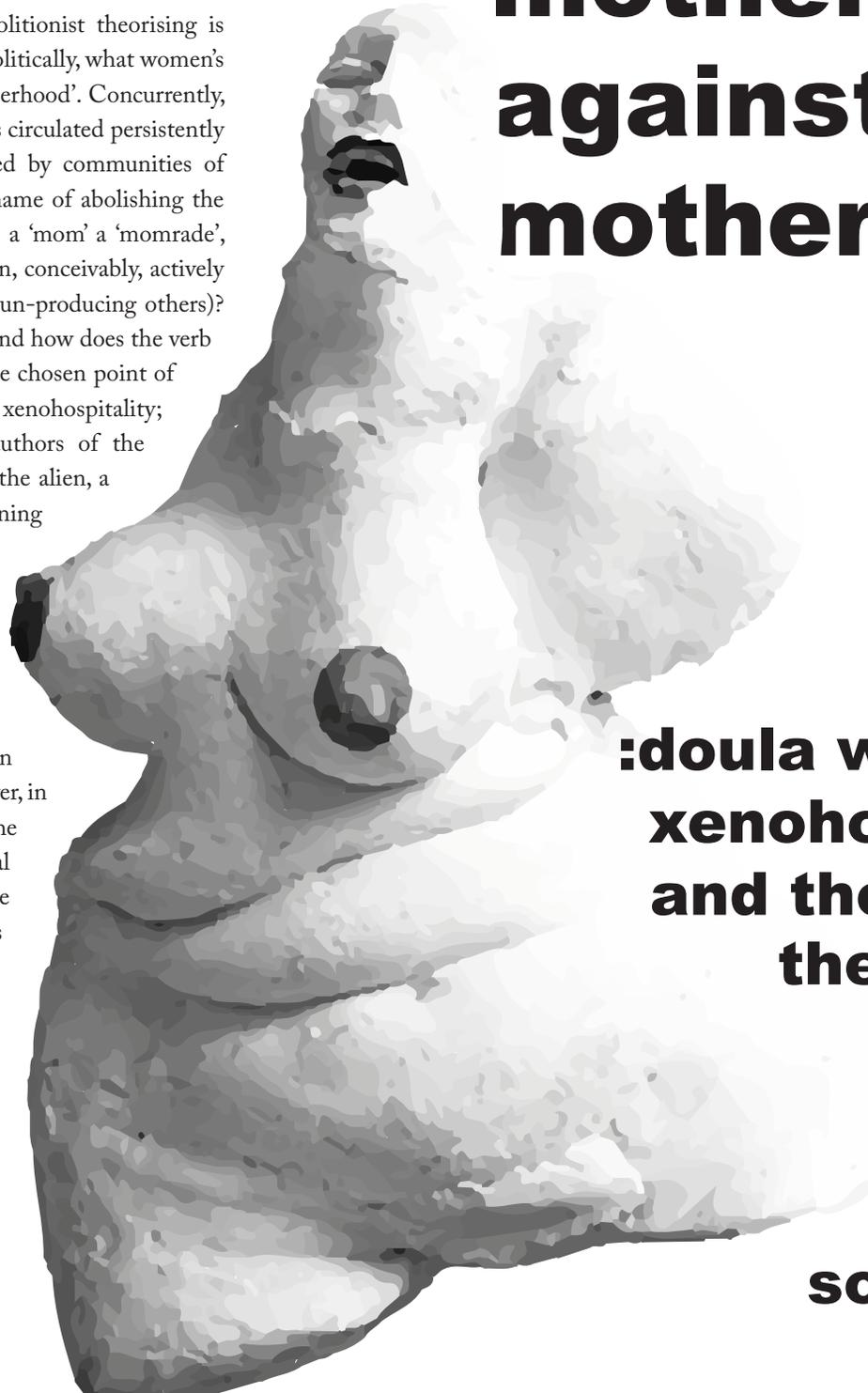


Today, a new vein of queer Marxist-feminist family-abolitionist theorising is reviving contemporary feminists' willingness to imagine, politically, what women's liberationists in the 1970s called 'mothering against motherhood'. Concurrently, the jokey portmanteau 'momrade', i.e. mom + comrade, has circulated persistently in the twenty-first century on online forums maintained by communities of mothers and/or leftists. This article asks: what if, in the name of abolishing the family, we took the joke entirely seriously? What makes a 'mom' a 'momrade', or vice versa? In what ways does the work of reproduction, conceivably, actively participate in class struggles, producing new worlds (and un-producing others)? How do the collective arts of mothering unmake selves? And how does the verb 'to mother' work to abolish the present state of things? The chosen point of departure for exploring these questions is the concept of xenohospitality; a term I borrow from Helen Hester – one of the authors of the Xenofeminist Manifesto – who defines it as openness to the alien, a definition I link closely to 'comradeliness'. Further, the meaning of the term 'family abolition', here, is aptly summed up by the formula 'xenofam ≥ biofam'; to abolish the family is not to destroy relationships of care and nurturance, but on the contrary, to expand and proliferate them. Reflecting on the conditions of possibility for such universally xenofamilial – that is to say, comradely – kin relations, this article implicitly argues for utopia(nism) in feminist kinship studies. It grounds this utopianism, however, in first-hand experiences of informal 'death doula' labour. The labour of mothering one's mother is offered as a potential practice of un-mothering oneself and others. In fact, the argument pivots on these auto-ethnographic observations about maternal bereavement, because the event of the author's mother's death interrupted and intruded upon the feminist theorising involved.

# mothering against motherhood

**∴doula work,  
xenohospitality  
and the idea of  
the momrade**

**sophie lewis**

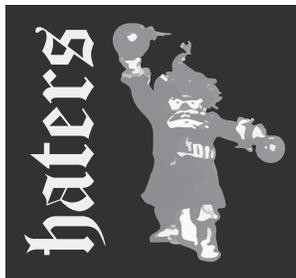


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# Mothering Against Motherhood: doula work, xenohospitality and the idea of the momrade

by Sophie Lewis



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## Diary of a family-abolitionist's year on tour

### By way of introduction

24 May 2019. Hmm. I'm noticing that ... people get kind of furious at the suggestion that they, as children, deserved more than they received.

17 August. It's not not personal. For anyone. Any family-abolitionist worth their salt understands all too well that the proposition 'abolish the family' attacks the very foundations of the self (as currently constituted). I think the psychological reaction-mechanism, and it's one all of us must contend with, goes something like this: *Well, sure, it may be a disciplinary, scarcity-based trauma-machine, but it's MY disciplinary, scarcity-based trauma-machine! And I don't know who I would be without it!!* In other words, the idea of family abolition triggers enormous onto-epistemological anxiety and, hence, often unleashes violent anger. 'Across the short term', as Jules and Kate note, whatever communist counter-familial institution we collectively build will no doubt be 'one of the least popular to have ever existed'. I know all this. All the same, I still find it amazing that some individuals seem to believe that my bio-mother getting cancer – and me publicly grieving her, *in more or less the same exact moment I birthed my book against motherhood* – is some kind of delicious irony, perhaps even a divine justice. 'Oh, you think everybody should have many mothers?! Well, I notice you're PRETTY SAD about your real mother dying! Checkmate!'

6 November. My personal bio-familial circumstances this year have involved terrible and looming bereavement, compounded by precarity, not to mention border- and immigration-related obstruction and capture. I call this surreal, not because it was somehow 'hypocritical' to be speaking publicly about abolishing the naturalised private/nuclear family – and its scaled-up counterpart, the nation – while, simultaneously, struggling (like so many people right now) to cross borders in order to be with a family member. Nor because it was somehow 'contradictory' to be preaching 'full surrogacy' while tending to my historically estranged mother's deathbed. Quite the contrary, kind of. The temporal coincidence of the *Full Surrogacy Now* launch with this (for me) unprecedented requirement that I be at my closest bio-relative's bedside brought the stakes of my subject matter to life with almost unbearable intensity.

3 December. Condolences. Wow – so, so many condolences. I sense there is something threatening about me right now, something radioactive in my aura, like a mark on my forehead that reads 'LOST HER MOTHER'. Some of the condolences have felt almost *violent*: ostensibly sympathetic comments that are, in reality, full of nervousness, reaction, fear, even, and discipline. I sense a lot of personal projection going on, about maternal bereavement's metaphysical and transhistoric meaning [sic]. Strangers have bombarded me with normative statements about what 'the death of one's mother' is, statements operating under the sign of the Universal Human Experience. It makes me angry. Aren't these people concerned about ... *doubling* my loss, by making visible my lack? Rubbing

it in my face that, not only have I lost the mother I *had*, but I lack the mother I didn't have, the one I *could* have lost in this romantic, normative way? I can't help but laugh over some of it. For example, it has been suggested to me that I should try to 'love myself' in the days ahead, quote: 'as she loved me'. LMAO! What a terrible idea. Like: honey? I am going to have to do so much better than that.

### *Life overtakes theorising*

On 26 November 2019, my mother, Ingrid Helga Lewis, died aged seventy-three in a hospice outside London. The proximate causes of her dying were: various cancers, diagnosed about a year prior, heart complications and certainly also that dubious thing 'alcoholism'. My mother was, among many other things, an ingeniously gifted humourist, a white anglophile German heterosexual (thrice-divorcée, twice from the same man), a middle-class liberal who was briefly an organised Maoist '68er at the University of Göttingen and a survivor of parental abuse; also, the first in her family to go to university. She was a wilful, though not explicitly feminist, cis woman who, at the age of forty-two, having achieved perfect bilingualism and a position at the BBC German Service, suddenly changed her mind about not having children. She quickly married an Englishman who worked for Reuters, gestated two children in a row and raised them to puberty with insufficient help from her new husband – and insufficient help from a succession of 'au pair girls' – the paid momrades of my childhood.

Even at the start, before she became suicidal, my understanding is that Mum vigorously refused the cultural and social identity of mother. She shrieked with protestatory laughter, for example, if ever a child referred to her as '*la maman de Sophie/Ben*' (we lived in France). Much later, however, she did want to be addressed by us grown-up kids, not as Ingrid, but as Mum and above all Mumputz: a characteristic Engleutsch (English/Deutsch) coinage of hers that seems to perfectly sum up her recalcitrant, roundabout, tragicomically belated entry into identification with 'feminist mothering' (Gordon, 1994). No doubt this has helped shape my understanding of the labour of mothering (in contrast to the institution of motherhood) as gender ambiguous or, at least, detachable from gender. The diminutive suffix, *-putz*, was one my Mumputz doled out affectionately to the people around her. I should hasten to add, however, that we numbered extremely few. She was unbelievably alone. Mumputz ineluctably pushed everyone – every last friend – away. But this nicknaming practice evoked a jocular equality, a friendzone, a conspiracy. It conjured the affective space within which I could, by her own account, introduce her to feminism via the pretence of her helping me (hindering me, honestly) with ad-hoc money-making gigs such as the German-to-English translation of Antje Schrupp's *A Brief History of Feminism* (2017, MIT Press) or *The Future of Difference* by Sabine Hark and Paula Villa (2020, Verso). Oscillating in and out of this discursive equality, every so often, she would vary Mumputz to 'Putz-in-Chief', so as to be distinguished from, e.g., Vickyputz, my partner, Benputz, her son, or Sophputz (aka Vice-Putz-in-Chief, for some reason), me.

reproduction of the present state of things.

Despite my best efforts, and despite her being, as I say, in the ongoing care of my brother and of extraordinary and loving hospice workers, in the event, my mother was accompanied at the time of her death by no bodily presence other than her ex-husband's, our estranged father, who happened to be visiting that day. She did have virtual company, however, and I have been telling myself – with limited success – that this was real company; good enough. She was listening, via smartphone, to a video recording of my brother and me singing an acoustic guitar version of the oddly sinister pop song 'Safe and Sound' by Taylor Swift. She was watched over, too, while she died, by an also sinister toy lobster from Boston's Logan airport that I had omitted to pay for en route to see her in August for what turned out to be the penultimate time. Additionally, her request had been to pass away listening to a 17th-century summer hymn, 'Geh aus, mein Herz, und suche Freud' ('Go Forth, My Heart, and Seek Delight') by Paul Gerhardt. So, I had learned to sing it and recorded it for her in full, using a voice-recorder app, in lieu of singing it by her deathbed in person (which I decided not to do in order to avoid jeopardising my green card application to the United States). She particularly relished the lines 'Narzissus und die Tulipan / Die ziehen sich viel schöner an / Als Salomonis Seide / Als Salomonis Seide. ('Narcissus and the tulip fair / Are clothed in raiment far more rare / Than all King Solomon's silks / Than all King Solomon's silks').

Larry the lobster brought Mumputz a lot of joy and, I think, made palpable my love for her. She was never henceforth without him. 'God, he looks evil!', she crows, holding him aloft in bed, in one clip I filmed on my phone. 'Doesn't he? Doesn't he?!'. It's true: he does – although, as she remarked once, depending on the angle you pick, he equally looks deeply sad. As I type these lines, I am looking at Larry in my home in Philadelphia, for, unlike Mum's ashes, he has already been returned to me. I am acutely conscious that his crimson polyester fur, his giant glowering plastic eyes, have served this Winter as my care surrogate, death doula-ing the hard-carapaced person who gestated my body into existence in 1987 and 1988. It was Larry who bore witness while the tinny sound of mine and my sibling's serenade played on the pillow next to Mum's fading eardrums: 'Just close your eyes, the sun is going down / You'll be all right, no one can hurt you now / Come morning light, you and I'll be safe and sound' (Swift, 2011, feat. The Civil Wars). Not a day passes for me, at present, when this refrain is not rattling around my head. May it strengthen my collective efforts, alongside other multispecies momrades in unvanquishable number, to abolish the sad and evil world, this present state of things.

the bounds of biogenetic and procreative registers, Donna Haraway has said, ‘make kin, not babies’ (2018, p. 103). But it is less often remarked upon, certainly among straight people, that people often make babies who never become kin. Haraway knows this, and, to her credit, lays constant stress on what one might call the need to make kin of babies – to make xenofam, as it were, out of one’s already-existing biofam. Thanks to her engagement with my text, and that of the respondents in the Full Surrogacy Now forum at *Society & Space*, I have explored the possibility that another way to spell my title might be as follows: ‘(real) surrogacy against (capitalist) feminism, and (real) feminism against (capitalist) surrogacy: FULL FAMILY NOW!’ (Lewis, 2020). Many readers are partial to this interpretation, reluctant to countenance a revival of what Kathi Weeks wittily calls ‘the infamous proposal of the feminists’ (2021). What a relief: ‘Lewis is demanding more family, not less’ (Munro, 2020: 3). However, when I am feeling more courageous, I stick to my guns and insist that abolition of the family is, as Marx and Engels put it, *precisely what we intend*.

Overthrowing motherhood with mothering is a communist horizon. While the currently operative fantasy of blood relationality is that it makes adopting one another unnecessary, in reality, as I sought to argue in *Full Surrogacy Now*, children never belong to us, their makers, in the first place (‘the fabric of the social is something we ultimately weave by taking up where gestation left off, encountering one another as the strangers we always are, adopting one another skin-to-skin, forming loving and abusive attachments, and striving at comradeship’ (Lewis, 2019: 9). All reproduction, I proposed, is assisted. Kinship is always made, not given. By the same token, more often than we think, where kinship is assumed as a given, it fails to be made. I am with McKenzie Wark (2016) when she proposes reviving the ancient word ‘kith, with its nebulous senses of the friend, neighbor, local, and the customary’; when she suggests the comradely rewrite of Haraway: ‘make kith, not kin!’. Could my mothering of my mother, striving to make kith, xeno-hospitably, at the eleventh hour, change my mother? Probably not. Could it go some way towards negating her negation of comradeship, though? Could it make a difference, could it change me? Could it uncover the elements of her mothering that had been momradely, and refuse the bad, the uncaring logics of the world that she had, in a sense, mothered (in the sense of reproduced) by refusing to mother?

### *Consider the lobster (in lieu of conclusion)*

It is too early to say. What I can say is that, by trying, I forgave Mumputz much. My brother and I mothered her, as people say, as best we could, without, however, dropping everything. It both was and was not natural for me to provide this mothering. It was both a reversal of an historic flow of care, and an invention of care ex nihilo, on the part of someone a little bit motherless, for the sake of her mother. It was mothering and anti-Mothering, self-mothering and re-mothering of another. It was mothering against my Mum’s style of motherhood, which was, for its part, both a non-motherhood and, by that same token, an effective mode of

By her own admission, my Putz-in-Chief more or less checked out of mothering me, not long after I got my first period, sinking into alcohol and sundry pill-based medications when I was about eleven, and she about fifty-three. Despite all this, believe it or not, I was not thinking explicitly of my mother when I pitched this piece to the special issue of *Feminist Theory* at hand, *Queering Genealogies*, in July 2019. As I remember it, I was speculating abstractly (even if concretely inspired by real people) about a subgenre of the ‘beautiful militants hell-bent on regeneration, not self-replication’ (Lewis, 2019: 167) whose enfleshment I had conjured in my utopian manifesto *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (2019, Verso). I was researching the question of what constitutes comradely care, and imagining ways to improve upon Donna Haraway’s slogan ‘make kin, not babies’ (2018). My book was officially launched, as it happens, six months prior to Mum’s death, only a couple of days before the NHS declared her cancer to be Stage 4. I was therefore on the right side of the Atlantic when that news came, albeit not – as Mum repeatedly pointed out – for the ‘right’ reason. For several weeks, I combined sitting in Mum’s hospital ward, helping her use the bathroom and trying to coax her into cleaning or at least lubricating her dried-out mouth, with book-signings and launch events.

At some point over that adult-diaper-studded summer, I noticed the portmanteau ‘momrade’, i.e. mom + comrade, on social media and in online forums of mothers and/or leftists. The satirical website ‘The Worker’s Spatula’, for instance, dedicated its 2019 Mother’s Day post to ‘all the momrades’.<sup>1</sup> The Brooklyn-based union organiser and anthropologist Kate Doyle-Griffiths tweeted that, while ‘collectivizing household labor in giant communes’ does not end capitalism in and of itself, ‘it absolutely can be a good thing for you and your momrades if you can pull it off’.<sup>2</sup>

Self-designated ‘mommy bloggers’, it transpires, have been using the term ‘momrades’ since at least 2004. The word appears in assorted social media bios and/or handles among community organisers all over the US (e.g. Democratic Socialists of America committee member @MomradeHeather; Texan ‘abolitionist’ @Lizonomics; ‘Commie Mommy’ @momrade\_; or ‘Unitarian socialist’ @MomradeJennifer). A momrade might, for example, title her post about interparental support ‘A Momrade in Need Is a Momrade Indeed’<sup>3</sup>; or, in a blog for ModernMom.com, share ‘nifty tips’ on toddlers gleaned from discussion ‘with several of my momrades’.<sup>4</sup> There have even been (albeit short-lived) websites flying the flag of momradeship: Momrades.blogspot.com and Momrades.com.<sup>5</sup>

1 @workersspatula, 12 May 2019. Available at: <https://twitter.com/WorkersSpatula/status/1127637064734920705> accessed 16/11/2021.

2 @kategrif, 30 May 2019. Available at: <https://twitter.com/kategrif/status/1133994625730060288> accessed 16/11/2021.

3 Beth Woolsey, 1 October 2016. Available at: <https://bethwoolsey.com/2016/10/a-momrade-in-need-is-a-momrade-indeed> accessed 16/11/2021.

4 Felissa Allard, 21 January 2016. Available at: [modernmom.com/10-ways-to-survive-twin-toddlers-or-a-single-toddler-116974.html](http://modernmom.com/10-ways-to-survive-twin-toddlers-or-a-single-toddler-116974.html) accessed 16/11/2021.

5 <http://momrades.blogspot.com>; <http://momrades.com>.

The page for ‘momrade’ on UrbanDictionary.com, dated 16 December 2017, lists a duo of radically different definitions: one hinging on the verb ‘to have’, and the other on ‘do’ – two options which the author (user ‘zuchinno’) has decided simply to link with a richly suggestive ‘and/or’.

**‘momrade, n.**

(1.) comrades who have children

and/or

(2.) comrades who do the lion’s share of support work and reproductive labor in the movement’.<sup>6</sup>

Comrades who have, or comrades who do? The writer Sheila Heti echoed the very same dyad in her 2018 novel *Motherhood*, albeit with none of the revolutionary left’s communist-abolitionist aims. Heti inveighs persuasively against the way some mothers in her culture talk ‘as though a child is something to have, not something to do. The doing is what seems hard. The having seems marvelous. But one doesn’t have a child, one does it’ (2016). Similarly, the Urban Dictionary contributor has unwittingly captured this tension, which constitutes the core concern of the feminist classic *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (Rich, 1976). Adrienne Rich, in that book, gave a helpful name to the mothering/motherhood antagonism: the opposition between reproductive labour’s dual potential to effect liberatory kinmaking (mothering), on the one hand, and to shore up anti-liberatory privatisation (motherhood), on the other. Experience vs. institution; relationality vs. entitlement. Given her sensitivity to the distinction, Heti should perhaps have entitled her book *Motherness. Or motherhood* with a lower-case ‘m’.

As I understand it: mothering is simply care labour; motherhood, an institution of private property. So, the fundamental question thrown up by both Heti and zuchinno could be formulated as follows: does (1.) automatically make you (2.)? Conversely, does *doing* (2.) entail *having* (1.)? Is *momming* identical to *being* a mom? If not, why not? Should momradeliness simply be comradeliness (but then, comradeliness vis-a-vis whom)? Does it only apply to persons who happen to have procreated – or legally adopted – progeny? Or is pulling one’s weight with regard to the so-called reproductive labours of life the only meaningful definition of comrade in the first place? Can a comrade be called a comrade if they are *not* a momrade? What, in that case, of people like my late mother, a sometimes-left activist who had children, owns legal papers to prove it, but does scant caring- or reproductive labour for those children, let alone for the movement? The bifurcated web definition of the momrade coinage, in short, perfectly distils the dialectic of mothering against motherhood – the competing truths of ‘Mother is an institution’ (Fineman, 2014: 70) and ‘Mother is a verb’ (Knott, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> <https://urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=momrade>.

m/other. I want to suggest that comradeliness, in some instances, might require encountering the natural(ised) mother in the register of the alien.

In her short treatise *Xenofeminism* (2018), Helen Hester – one of the six members of the Laboria Cuboniks collective that authored the Xenofeminist Manifesto (XF) (2015) – elaborates on XF’s anti-natural and gender-abolitionist anticapitalist politics of reproduction. In particular, in her chapter ‘Xenofeminist Futurities’, Hester elaborates on the proposition ‘xenofam ≥ biofam’. The equation conveys the idea that projects of comradeliness vis-a-vis the alien, i.e. so-called nonbiological kinmaking or (to revive the other half of the ancient phrase ‘kith and kin’) relations of kith, match or exceed the capabilities of families built on genetic coincidence alone. The authors’ careful use of the sign equal or greater than (≥) already makes clear to the careful reader that so-called biological procreation can absolutely be a site of comradeliness equal to any other: there is no repudiation of biogenetic reproduction operative here; no ‘matrophobia’ (Hallstein and O’Brien, 2010). Hester nevertheless painstakingly adds ‘the explicit caveat that so-called “blood relations” can themselves become xenofamilial through an ongoing orientation towards practical solidarity’ (2018: 65). Xenofamiliarity, for Hester, functions both as a utopian horizon and a latent reality in the present, referring to the ensemble of templates for social reproduction that are grounded in solidarities synthesised across differences.

Mumputz for me was not, on the face of things, xenos (a stranger). I knew this woman, in part because I had observed and absorbed her intimately throughout infancy, and in part because (as our WhatsApp message history attests) I had actively tried to get to know her, as an adult, following a long period of estrangement. All the same, she did feel surprisingly alien to me. For one thing, she did not particularly know me, nor did she really care to, although she knew my child self, no doubt. She did not seek to hold me. She regretted procreativity on the terms of the existing psycho-economic order; but, well, here I was. Here I am. I cannot afford the luxury of that regret. Nor, even if I could, would I want to follow in her footsteps and check out of all responsibility. We were, then, unequally intimate strangers. We were historically divided companions, asymmetric co-victims and perpetrators of the nuclear family, faced with the tasks, respectively, of dying (as well as possible), and of instantiating a kind of equality between us. That, in a nutshell, is why the horizon of comradeliness, more so than love, seems like the most useful term to think about her need for end-of-life mothering with. Jodi Dean (2017): “‘comrade’ names a relation characterized by sameness, equality, and solidarity’. Comradeliness, then, is not accountability; it does not operate in the register of past history. It names the making history part of the famous dictum, the present future-oriented part, not the part about all that weight of unrepaired history we inherit, the circumstances not of our own choosing.

Making Mum comfortable / a comrade required learning a form of xenohospitality (hospitality to the other, the alien). We have already mentioned how, speaking to the ethical imperative to enact this allomaternal hospitality, this kinmaking outside

was complementing them, taking their place or (ultimately) simply leaving her to them. I emulated them by pledging myself, so far as possible, to her side, while still leaving room in myself for the often painful and horrible feelings she elicited. I stroked her forehead very gently, on one occasion, and gasped when I realised from the way she closed her eyes instantly, whimpering with pleasure, how radically my fingertips – any fingertips – were needed in that place. Hospice workers and Ben and I, and, at the end, her ex-husband (Dad), we were all she had. I knew, and felt compassionate about, how anxious and ambivalent Mum was, right to the end, about my company. (She sometimes expressed, even in those last months, even though I live in the US, that she would rather my visits were not very prolonged.) I took her at her word. I did not stay longer than my visa imbroglio with the United States would allow. The main thing I felt, before I left, watching her smoke and drink wine, waiting to die, is that she deserved a better world, one that might have fostered wilder and less lonely desires. I deserve that world, too. She was one of the people who owed, who owe it to me.

In merely disidentifying with the label mother, my Putz-in-Chief ended up failing to challenge that mechanism of conservation, reproduction and quiescence, Motherhood. This, to be sure, is why that old distinction between mother and what I have proposed to call mother-er is crucial; and why matricentric feminism has recently undergone a revival, led by (amongst others) Toronto-based feminist and Rich scholar Andrea O'Reilly, who asks that feminism be 'committed to the abolition of motherhood and the achievement of mothering' (2004). Mothers vested with the authority of Motherhood have, after all, historically both brought down oppressive regimes and built them. On the one hand, maternal feminists, maternalist activists and femonationalists (so-called mothers of the nation) have served for centuries as prime movers of world-systemic evils such as white supremacy, spearheading imperial and settler-colonial projects of racial uplift and eugenics (McRae, 2018). On the other, proletarian mothers and housewives, invoking that same Motherhood, have consistently posed a formidable threat to capitalism and the state (Orleck, 2017). Meanwhile, dispossessed mamas, mamis, othermothers and queer mother-ers have sometimes rejected the claims to authority and authorship associated with Motherhood, fighting instead on the basis that *children belong to everyone and children belong to no one but themselves* (Lewis, 2019).

The dialectic of mothering against motherhood is more properly articulated *not* as a contradiction in the soul of every mother, but as a structural matter of colonially imposed scarcity; of planetary whiteness and its abolition; of the war between social reproduction from below and class society's reproduction from above; of motherhood's very invention and design, finally, as an institution to render indigenous and formerly enslaved people 'kinless' (Spillers, 1987; Sharpe, 2016). Feminist philosophy, for decades, has powerfully dismantled the social and cultural logics that render the figure of the mother (m/other) Other. However, I want now to make a plea for the value of recognising the possibility of a genuine

No joke: when I submitted my initial abstract I was not – at least not consciously – thinking about Mum(putz). If anything, I was thinking of the real momrades I have known: those other humans in my life who, in fact, helped reverse and heal the pain that *she* (and my long-since-divorced-from-her dad) inflicted over the years, by not mothering me in any significant way through my adolescence. I was thinking of the many-gendered othermothers in my life (Wane, 2000; Edwards, 2004). Or, to avoid appropriating a term (othermother) from Black feminism and, instead, coin yet another, in order to designate people who do mothering without necessarily being mothers – of the multi-generational *mother-ers* of my experience. My mother, that is, my official mother, was many things – but as far as I could see, she was not a mother-er. She was not often a momrade. She was, actually, one of the least care-oriented individuals of my acquaintance.

Thus, of course, I must have been thinking of her, if only in the negative. But then, just in time to avoid the Covid-19 pandemic, she died. My intention in this piece – in pursuit of the momrade – remains the same: to interrogate what can be achieved by taking that neologism's little joke entirely seriously; to see what happens when we put the notions of mothering and comradeliness into earnest dialogue with one another. The broader stakes of my inquiry have not changed. They can be summed up in the following questions: how do mothers-against-motherhood, i.e. mother-ers, abolish the present state of things? In what ways might the collective arts of comradely care unmake worlds? What makes mothering anti-productive, rather than reproductive? And how do all these questions reprise, tweak and/or recombine concepts like xenofamiliarity and xenohospitality (Latoria Cuboniks, 2015; Hester, 2018); abolition of the family (Griffiths and Gleeson, 2015; King, 2018; O'Brien, 2019b; Weeks, 2021); queer, Black, of colour and indigenous polymaternalisms (Wane, 2000; Gumbs, 2010; Park, 2013; Gumbs et al., 2016; TallBear, 2016, 2018); and the idea of 'mothering against motherhood' (Rich, 1976; O'Reilly, 2004)? While the project's outline stayed firm, the methodology radically changed.

This article became unexpectedly auto-theoretical.

### *The (un)mothering of Mumputz*

The trauma of Mum's desertion of me remains severely challenging in my life. Yet, besides hurt and hatred, I also feel deep empathy, bordering on respect, regarding her disgusted exit (via suicidality) from what, were she Kim TallBear, she might have described as 'my misery in the marriage and nuclear family system' (2016: 151). Whereas, in the past, I have on occasion wished my mother dead, for the past decade or so it has been hard for me to condemn her outright for opting out of the job (of mothering me) that capitalist society was compelling her to do in such a lonely way. After all, my deepest spiritual and political commitments are to the queer revolutionary slogan 'abolish the family'. In other words, alongside a small but swelling number of avowed family-abolitionist writers in the US and UK, I consider the positive supersession of the nuclear-normative family to have

always been the proper object of queer liberation and feminist/gender liberation struggles (on this history, see e.g.: Ng, 2013; Doyle-Griffiths and Gleeson, 2015; O'Brien, 2019b, 2020). Under capitalism, as Alva Gotby notes, 'families are work relations' (2019: 205). They trap feminised people in isolated unwaged workplaces and, moreover, function predominantly to generate present *and future* workers for capital to wring value from. Because of this, and because children moreover possess very few rights and freedoms within the home, an all-important question for those of us opposed to the tyranny of work is how to 'abolish the family for kids' (Lane-McKinley, 2018). The horizon of children's liberation was once a serious concern for the left, with scholars in the 1960s and 1970s exploring ways to aid and abet young people's emancipation, collective autonomy and self-determination (Gottlieb, 1973; Bronski, 2018). 'How would you talk to a child about family abolition?' – in Madeline Lane-McKinley's chapbook of poetry *Dear Z*, the poet writes to her child, 'I wonder how to abolish the family not without you but with you' (2019).

I disagree with the received wisdom that mothers, in the present conjuncture, should conceal from their children, at all costs, that they have regrets about having had children. If you ask me, of all the things Mumputz did wrong, the fact that she did not conceal this was among the least of them. Children, while needful of and entitled to abundant unconditional commitment (Winnicott, 2017), are also capable, and benefit from, reciprocal comradeship, in my view. Children cannot be mothered by the unmothered, and they are not, collectively speaking, well-served by the bio-legal lottery system that allocates them quasi-irreversibly to the private care of a few adults who are supposed to share with them two entire decades defined by a lonely, unsustainable, car-dependent architecture of atomisation (Doyle-Griffiths and Gleeson, 2015). Kids are, in fact, probably better than most people at intuitively grasping that 'The more loving and chosen the family, the more amenable it may be to self-abolishing'; that family abolition, in other words, 'is not the destruction of kinship ties that currently serve as protection against white supremacy, poverty, and state violence, but instead the expansion of that protection into broader communities of struggle' (O'Brien, 2019b).

Kids, in their inspiring freedom from proprietarian ideology, are themselves the inventors, not just the heirs, of the possibilities of the future care commune. Nobody should have to be shackled in an apartment to their gestator (or gestatee) against their will: in the template communes envisioned by utopian socialist Charles Fourier in the 1800s, or by Shulamith Firestone in 1970, 'a parent or child ... can opt out of a messed-up dynamic when it isn't working, knowing everyone will be cared for. No one is bound together violently any longer' (O'Brien, 2019a). As a child, I did not want anyone to be bound together violently. I believe I never became confused – in the way feminist opponents of surrogacy, for example, believe children always must – about the difference between a mother's 'regretting motherhood' (Donath, 2017) and my mother wishing me dead. To be clear, I do not believe that what my sibling and I received was 'good enough mothering', to

still given, in the document, to celebratory anecdotes, such as the one about her one-night stand with what turned out to be the former prime minister of the Netherlands; or the one about her escaping a police kettle in Berlin, aged sixty-four, by claiming to be pregnant (with cigarette in mouth and a random twenty-something lad in tow – this is the father!). She was not much of a comrade to the people most affected by her, is the consensus. 'But in some vectors of bestness, she was best'.

Mum made clear, in her final months, that she had no desire to talk, listen, give blessings, nor to atone, apologise, repair, reconcile. Her desire was, quite simply, for booze and fags; plus, sometimes, a few other forms of soothing. She wanted to be amused and distracted, occasionally by people, but most dependably by her own storytelling, which she would perform, regardless of who she was with, while drinking wine and chain-smoking (on her back, under a mandatory safety blanket, to prevent her electric bed from catching fire). When her ability to eat and drink failed, the hospice facilitated her imbibing of wine by providing a wine-sponge on a stick. These days, it is the thought of that comradeship on the part of the hospice staff, with their care for my mother's dignity and comfort in that prolonged time of muffled terror, that most reliably makes me cry.

#### *Family abolitionism rebooted: Xenofam, comradeship and kith*

Why do I claim that this wine-stick-providing action – so remote from formal political affiliation – can be called 'comradeship'? For political theorist Jodi Dean (2017) (who would, I should point out, categorically reject my application of the term to this scenario), 'a comrade is one of many fighting on the same side'. Towards the end of Mum's life, inspired by the death-doulas of the hospice system – these deeply skilful emotional labourers, at times indistinguishable from sex workers – I arrived at long last at a radical acceptance of the way that a certain line had been drawn, with my Mumputz on one side, and a whole army of injustices on the other. Perhaps I could, after all, fight in this particular struggle against unnecessary suffering, small and isolated as it was, *on her side*. Perhaps I could understand myself as *with her* (the word *midwife* etymologically means with-woman). Perhaps I could feel compassion for the blows the world dealt her, that shaped her need to use substances the way she did. Basically, I saw a line. I picked a side. I found myself at long last able to radically accept her drinking, pill-popping and smoking. I stopped siding against her. Theirs, at the hospice, was a logic sharply distinct from the mainstream biomedical logic of care. It seemed to me to be comparable to that of harm reduction as articulated in O'Brien's manifesto 'Junkie Communism'. Harm reduction, writes O'Brien (2019c), offers 'an alternative ethical framework that allows us to stop constantly judging others – and ourselves – according to the rigid criteria of political righteousness. Instead we could learn to care for each other with dignity, to challenge our capacity for harm by lovingly welcoming the most painful parts of ourselves'.

Instead of fighting Mum, I sought to emulate the hospice workers, whether I

during this phase of final decline in 2019, she inexplicably thought it was comical and cute to call her son pondlife.

‘More cigarettes. More wine. I don’t think I will die soon’, she would declare, even as she grew more and more blurred, waxen and immobile. Although visibly frightened, she did, simultaneously somehow, seem to believe this. My sense was that the sheer spiritual and cognitive effort required by that denial, together with the vast pain she was in, swimming in morphine, swallowed everything else. She had already spent great swaths of the past two decades asleep, but now she slept constantly. When awake, she was, on the whole, impossible – even more so than usual – but I found myself for once able to see past her aversive cowardice and toddler-like solipsism, to the courage it took, for seventy years, for her to be herself.

Nevertheless, it was irritating that, apart from ‘I love you’, which she did say, several times, Mumputz had nothing to say to those of us she left behind. Particularly since it turns out that she had on occasion summoned the courage, privately, to admit that she was dying just to herself. There exists a scrap of paper, found posthumously on her desk, where she writes:

*Death Labour* I will miss the boat. This time I’ve really done it. I can’t even catch the next one. It’s not waiting. It’s not stopping for me. Even if I explain about the lost ticket they won’t give me another one. It can’t be 5 to 12 anymore. I can’t do it at the last minute. But I thought: it’s not fair. Why have I lost my appeal? I’ll miss the hope (another chance). Another autumn. Another evening class. Another man.

In the days following her death, my closest comrade, Judy, used Google Documents to collate hilarious recollections of Mum contributed by several friends, and to curate, with me, choice Mumputz apothegms, pronouncements and emoji-art. The final version, two months on, contains hardly any accounts of any of the brutal, unforgivable things she did over the course of my lifetime, let alone her lifetime (and editing was, I should specify, only open to chosen family from my lifetime). It does, however, allude a little to her violence, and consequently pays tribute to a human being in a candid and unromantic manner. Which I consider preferable to the standard, bowdlerising approach often adopted in our culture when eulogising the dead. Judy additionally prefaced the collage with an ode whose opening words are: ‘Ingrid was an alcoholic on a mobility scooter with a handbag in the shape of a teapot calling people who pointed to No Smoking signs fascists’.

‘An Ode to our Putz-in-Chief’ is a deeply loving text – loving above all to me, but also to the deceased – in which Judy speaks frankly of how Ingrid ate the birthday cakes and drank the champagne that she bought for her children, the better to pay honest tribute to her strangeness and refusal and deeply queer dignity. These, according to Judy, were the characteristics that made her too weird to be abject. Part of the definition of comradeship, in our friendship, is that grieving can only function respectfully because of, not despite, truthfulness. Pride of place is

use Winnicott’s term (2017: 244). I am quite aware that I am traumatised and in need of healing. It is just that, as an anti-work, anti-racist, queer communist, I understand the nuclear family to be capitalism’s point zero. I cannot wholeheartedly condemn Mum’s past insistence, during that time when she was still trying to mother, on being finite; on wanting, as Ali Wong puts it, not to lean in, but rather to lie down (Wong, cited in Simons, 2016). It is difficult not to love a woman on strike. Even when her product is ... you.

Somewhere along the road, I realised that I respected certain aspects of Mumputz’s (scant) parenting style. Counter-intuitively, I think I came to this appreciation via reading Alexis Pauline Gumbs. Counterposing Black mothering to hegemonic motherhood, Gumbs, an independent scholar, poet, activist and educator in North Carolina, historicises the collective polymaternal labour of Black women – ‘those who were never meant to survive’ – as queer, because ‘it disrupts the social reproduction of capital by offering an alternative social framework’ (2010: 236). This definition of queerness was, of course, pioneered by Cathy Cohen in ‘Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens’ in 1997.

Gumbs, writes: ‘M/other is a verb. Black mothering, the production of radical difference, when done for “ourselves” as a reclamation of labor and a reflexive intervention against the reproduction of sameness, is an alternate mode of production’ (2010: 192), foreshadowing Sarah Knott’s titular phrase. This, in brief, is the sensibility undergirding my conviction that the language of *mother* can be disentangled from its gender and familial baggage. Its associated labour generalised utopically in a postcapitalist society whose impossible logic of full surrogacy we can likely for now not imagine, nor even *desire*, yet.

The qualifications to Gumbs’s assertion – for instance, *when done as an intervention against the reproduction of sameness* – should no doubt give enthusiastic readers of her work (of whatever ethnicity) significant pause. It is not just that, as one scholar-activist rightly reminds her fellow white people, Black mothering cannot simply be taken up by white people, just as ‘indigenous practices of relationality cannot be taken up by settlers’ (Shotwell, 2018) – although this is no doubt the first point to note. It is also the recognition, implicit in Gumbs’s formulation, that the definition of queerness as anti-capital (because anti-property) depends, for its coherence, on an understanding that mothers who happen to be Black might *not* be engaged in ‘Black mothering’ in this queer, Gumbsian sense. And while it is particularly imperative that white people should ‘craft new practices of being in relation that can destroy settler colonialism and its articulation with anti-Black racism and border militarism’ (Shotwell, 2018), this imperative logically also extends to many non-white people, too.

With Gumbs and Shotwell, I am deeply, ongoingly curious about the collective art of kin-making (and -unmaking!) as a terrain of struggle. How might multi-gendered labours of baby-making be changed quantitatively (e.g. redistribution) as well as qualitatively, such that they are implicated in the dismantling of whiteness

and the building of the universal commune? How is mothering, despite being called *reproduction*, in fact anti-(re)productive (because anti-proprietary)? In ‘My Son Runs in Riots’, a poem by Christy NaMee Eriksen included in Gumbs’s edited collection *Revolutionary Mothering* (Gumbs et al., 2016), not only is reproduction non-reproductive and collective; it is nothing short of bomb-making. For Eriksen, breast-feeding is weapon-building, and mothers of colour are polymaternal *pétroleuses* by default. Children are comrades, belonging to everyone, and to no one but themselves: ‘when you watch the video / It’s tough to tell whose son it is’ (Eriksen, in Gumbs et al., 2016: 79). Indeed – so I’ve learned – baby-making has long been explicitly recognised in some strands of Black feminism as a destructive as much as a creative enterprise; an insurgency of the commons and an unnatural danger: personal yet plural, intimate yet inclusive, loving yet unpretty. The motive question undergirding this poetics, for the *structurally queer* mothers involved, becomes: how can this world-ending (not just world-making) power be equitably distributed and harnessed, collectively organised and directed? For, as Jennifer Nash has, with characteristic perspicacity, cautioned: (even) Black mothering is surely not always and automatically transgressive. It is urgent that we as antiracist feminists retain a denaturalising, non-romanticising heuristic when thinking about ‘revolutionary mothering’: one attuned, in particular, to ‘maternal ambivalence’ (Nash, 2019: 711).

The main way the debates within Black queer anticapitalist polymothering literature have led me to appreciate my own mother’s parenting is, of course, simply in the negative. Hers was, obviously, very much not the subversive bad mothering that is bad for capitalism – hers was not the weaponised care that Gumbs theorises by developing and extending Audre Lorde’s famous injunction to Black lesbians, ‘We can learn to mother ourselves’. Mum’s passive work stoppage or slowdown was categorically not somehow a ‘production of a rival mothering’ antithetical to the reproduction of the nuclear heteropatriarchal family (Gumbs, 2010: 187). Put it this way: if I am anything like a bomb, it is not because Mum, in her alcoholic solitude, was (able to be) a bomb-builder. In recognition that her practices of being-in-relation were not particularly destructive of the world’s many matrices of domination, this article is, in itself, an attempt at one small step towards crafting such practices. It is intended to be part of the painful and difficult task that has been called ‘Claiming Bad Kin’. The claiming of bad kin occurs, writes Alexis Shotwell, when ‘white settlers claim rather than disavow our connection to white supremacist people and social relations’, and when ‘friends and comrades work as race traitors against whiteness’ (2018).

In saying that Black polymaternalist feminisms helped me appreciate my unreflexively white bio-parent, what I am saying is that they gave me the words to express the hope – one which Mum’s historic neglect merely drove me to, whereas they open it – ‘what if anyone can participate in the production of the future by parenting, teaching, surviving?’ (Gumbs, 2010: 201). As part of my family abolitionism, I had to claim my bad kin.

Mum was no momrade; she was no queer mother-er. Yet, in her performance of motherhood, there was one kernel of something Gumbs names in her analysis of revolutionary mamahood, namely, the reclamation/refusal of imposed labour. The best way I know to explain what I mean is that although Mumputz was by no means queering motherhood, although she was white, and cis, and straight, and middle class, she nevertheless did motherhood *as though it were a form of drag*. The task (of mothering) centrally consisted for her, it seemed, of thrusting sunscreen and kiwis, aka *Vitaminbomben* (vitamin bombs), on the younger generation, often in a cod-Nazi-officer voice. But even when the joke was not funny – indeed, even when it was scary and deadly serious, as when she screamed in maniacal fury at us about the laundry or the washing up – one was, sort of, in on the joke. A production of difference, without a doubt. I don’t know that I have forgiven her everything, but I am grateful to her for her immanent critique of the invisibility of domestic reproductive labour. I am grateful for her structurally queer denaturalisation of motherlove. Her dissatisfaction with the status quo was, I know, transmitted to all her kids (*kidrades?*) – biological and not.

#### *Comradely death-doula-ing of a non-momrade*

I am amazed to say that the imperative of incorporating Mum directly into this article only truly broke the surface of my consciousness when I found myself finally, stunningly, bereaved of her. Shell-shocked, that winter, I sought out the support of a death-doula collective in my adoptive hometown of Philadelphia. Every week, from early December 2019 to mid-2020, the Philly Death Doula Collective’s grief circles provided me and many others with solidarity, momradeliness and care in the form of simple, mutual, mostly-silent witnessing of grief. It was the practice of that organisation that helped me realise that it was now, as much as anything, my own comradeliness, my own momradeliness, my own endeavour to re-mother myself and others, that I had felt impelled to theorise. Moreover, by teaching me about doula-ing (which I define as the practice of companionate holding, especially across difficult thresholds in life), the collective enabled me to perceive that a large part of what I had done throughout 2019 was in fact a form of doula-ing of my mother’s death. I doula-ed her not just for her (anyway, she resisted some of this doula-ing, just as she resisted the experience of death), but, crucially, for all of us, especially myself and my sibling, Ben.

Mum did not, it is fair to say, hold (i.e. doula) anyone through her own death, least of all herself. Particularly since she had no one else in her life, she benefited hugely in her final year from the aforementioned young man, Ben, her adult son (who lives in France). For many months, Ben jeopardised his job by taking time off work to jet over and sit with her. Be it at her home in suburban London, or in hospital, he soaked up her brattiness for weeks at a time – waiting, in limbo, in that zone of impossible/non-prognosis. It could be many more months, or she could die at any time. To and fro Ben went, bereft, at this point, of any hope of receiving a reckoning or resolution from her for the deep violence she did to him in the 2000s by repeatedly flirting with suicide right in front of him. Several times,