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PEYTON BOND

FOR YOUR LIFE & LIFE-MAKING

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ABSTRACT

This essay draws together the work of anti-capitalist feminist theorists, from Silvia Federici and Shulamith Firestone to Emma Heaney and M.E. O'Brien, with archives and memories of my late grandmother's life. The entanglements of capitalism, gender, labour and love provoke a critical dialectic, centred on the contradictions of life-making under capitalism. Historically contingent, muddled and ripe with tensions, this meditation on gender converges around the question of: when is it love? To attempt to disentangle love and labour from the confines and constraints of gender under capitalism is to enter a knotty dialogue that spans our histories, presents and future-possibilities. This essay is dedicated to the complexities and provocations of life-making labour, particularly as it pertains to relationality, love and gender itself.

INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, when I first read Silvia Federici's 1975 "Wages Against Housework," something about gender and capitalism finally made sense to me: "They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work."[1] The seeping of these gendered relations into all facets of what we call *life* had seemed scattered, fragmented, before reading the militant words of an anti-capitalist feminist movement that happened several decades before I was born. The part that still felt hard, that still could not totally click into full being, was the question: but when is it still love? Feminist theorising of social reproduction and liberation began to untangle this central inquiry. Madeline Lane-McKinley, author of *Solidarity with Children,* similarly writes about not being able to "unhear" Federici's bold feminist assertion. She began, like me, to think of it more in questions than as statement, questions "about what can be discerned of love—romantic, maternal, and otherwise—if it cannot be untethered from unwaged work."[2] I began to assemble an archive: communisation of care, social reproduction, feminism against cisness, anti-carceral feminisms, emotional labour and reproduction, friendship as uncommodified relationalities ...[3] My tangential archive coalesced around feminist speculations: what if these most crucial caring labours were freed from patriarchal capitalism, freed from their assignations to the feminine, and were instead distributed among us all? What could care become, what could *gender* become, if life-making labours belonged to all of us?

"All over the world," Emma Heaney writes of the 1970s feminist struggles, "women were observing that womanhood itself is the social expression of reproductive labour."[4] Heaney's articulation of a materialist feminist dialectic—premised on a 1970 dialogue between "two best friends" Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera—captures critical insight into gender, capitalism and feminism. The conversation is as follows:

> Johnson: I could always talk like a woman. I could always act like a woman. I could always do things that women would do because I was raised by my mother. Like, I could wash … iron … cook … sew …
>
> Rivera: [cutting in] That's very oppressive toward women.
>
> Johnson: Well, that's what they're good for doing. …
>
> Rivera: [cutting in] Ewwww, stop!
>
> Johnson: That's what they always do. That's what my mother did. Well, some women don't do that, but my mother was poor; she had to do it all herself.
>
> Rivera: I, as a person, don't believe that a transvestite or a woman should do all the washing, do all the cooking, and do everything that's forced on by the bourgeois society and the establishment that women have to do this. I don't believe in that; that's all a lot of baloney. If you have a lover, or you have a friend that you really care for, you split everything down fifty-fifty. If you don't feel like doing it, you just don't do it. Let him do it because this is what we're all trying to get across. Men are oppressive. They just oppress you in all different ways.[5]

Even though these positions are opposed to each other (women *are* their domestic labour, and domestic labour *oppresses* women), they also provide pertinent analysis in their contradictions. The affinity, as Heaney describes it, that Marsha P. Johnson has with the life-giving labours of her mother speaks to gender-making as (in part) an intergenerational lineage: gender is socially (re)produced, and social reproductive activities not only reproduce "labour powers and our society more generally, but gender distinctions appropriate to 'women' themselves."[6] In thinking through social reproduction, in thinking through how we make lives, we can also consider that we "are the makers of gender … these activities can be nothing other than realisations of our powers … we have the powers to make and continuously remake gender."[7] Heaney argues that the 1970 dialogue reveals an "analytic truth":

> … to destroy patriarchy would be to free these, the only necessary labours, from their gendered and racialised character, to communise them, to free the world's efforts from the production of surplus value and bourgeois identities and refocus these efforts on the tasks that sustain and reproduce life.[8]

That is, life-giving and life-making work is that most necessary labour, yet its assignation to the feminine (re)produces stratifications and oppressions. Heaney's understanding of gender is premised, first, on the contradictions of social reproduction under capitalism.[9] Social reproduction—an abode "even more hidden" than Marx's hidden abode—describes "forms of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds."[10] In other words, social reproduction is what makes and sustains us. The material feminist dialectic Heaney offers, which foregrounds a refocusing of our collective efforts towards social reproductive activities, is the orientation of this writing and of my feminism more broadly.

Some things about social reproduction, those activities which make and sustain life, only became clear to me after the death of my grandmother, nicknamed 'Tinkie' in her youth. She had been unwell for over a decade, dementia slowly drawing her mind away from us. I had left Virginia for the Southern Hemisphere on my grandmother's birthday, 10 August, almost a decade before her death. I had known, in my body if not the front of my mind, the ineffable impacts of my grandmother's love and care in shaping my life. I had not thought of it as gender-making, or life-making, or even (to be perfectly honest) as labour. It was only when she was gone, and I pored through the archives of our life, that I began to finally understand the provocation at the centre of my grief. Lane-McKinley captures this provocation, asking "what does it mean to care for others when that care is coerced? *and what does it mean to receive such care?* [emphasis my own]"[11] It is the latter question that I turn to for this essay, that guides the feminist method of thinking through and "scaling up" the experiences of the everyday and ordinary.[12] What my grandmother did in her life, the reverberations of which still move through my own and many others' lives, that 'women's work,' that diffuse and relational care labour, was (re)productive of gender, yes—mine, others and her own. But it was also a glimpse into something more. I had learned, through living, through reading, through teaching, "how we are limited and constrained" by the dynamic social relations of social reproduction and capitalism.[13] Through my grandmother, though, her labours and love and labours of love, I could at last envision—and seek to embody and struggle towards—"other, better, freer possibilities" for the organisation of care and of gender itself.[14]

The entry into this particular meditation on gender is thus the disruptive power of life-making itself, grounded in stories that ask: what if we freed the gendered care and labour of our mothers, grandmothers and sisters, and instead moved towards a world where this care no longer had gendered boundaries, where an affinity with care was not precluded by gender? We could understand the caring we see now as

> … labouring that, if only in brief glimpses, and however indirectly, gets at the possibilities of what could be otherwise. And we know this thing—and we know that we know it—but without being able to name it … Perhaps the naming of it is beside the point.[15]

To explore the potentialities of our present with hope towards our futures, I lay out the life-making labours of my grandmother, read through different pieces of our lives together. I draw these labours into conversation with feminist thinkers whose understandings of mothering, capacious possibilities of care and patriarchal capitalism push towards gender liberation.

MOTHERING

My little sister, somewhere between a baby and a toddler, sits on my grandmother's lap in the digitised home video from 2002. My grandmother has a bottle in one hand, feeding my sister, and the other hand holding the gift we—a gaggle of cousins—had presented to her on her seventieth birthday. The gift was a decorated container, within which lived many bits of small paper, each scribbled with memories of our grandmother that we held most dear. She read the memories out loud on-screen as I watched, over two decades later, with tears sometimes blurring my vision. I was seven years old in this video and, like many of the cousins running around, was wearing a swimsuit as

I leaned on her soft shoulder, silently reading the words on the bits of paper as she read them aloud. I often became excited when a memory was read that my mom or dad (her son) had written, whispering "my dad!" into her ear when I recognised the story. She would sometimes pause to tell the full story of the memory to her children, her husband's children, their wives and husbands and kids. I had forgotten how funny she was, her timing and subtle looks. She laughed generously, often, an open-mouthed laugh that always shook her shoulders. There were so many people around—so many adults—but she kept making time for me, my comments, my questions, as the other cousins scattered. I had written in a memory for her: "I like playing games with you because you always laugh when someone else wins." She read it aloud and turned to me, knowing it was my memory, and whispered: "not everyone has nice children to play with, you know that?"

As the video progressed, my seven-year-old self leaned more and more into her body. I felt envy of this 2002-self; I knew that in that moment I would have felt the softness of her blue T-shirt, her specific smell of flour and Dove soap, would have felt listened to even among the chaos of families colliding. At one stage, she turned to me again: "These are treasures, Peyton." As she read out more and more of these one- or two-line memories, the shape of her impact on our making clarified and reverberated. She made Tollhouse chocolate chip cookies, biscuits with thick slabs of butter, South Carolina chewies and these brownies that were in a league of their own. We ate lunch at her house every day of the summers when school was out. She made a Sunday dinner each week for her whole extended family and anyone they wanted to bring along—fried chicken and buttered rolls and macaroni and cheese and some green designs my palate had less interest in. My mom, her daughter-in-law, has always said she must have had fairies helping her. How else could one woman feed and love so many people? I watched my younger self absorbing, not yet with the language I have now, the criss-crossing infrastructure of her care.

Each of the memories I watched my grandmother read aloud, as seven-year-old me nestled into her shoulder, always watching and always listening, was an expression of profound gratitude for her extensive labours. More particularly, for her extensive work of social reproduction. She "always had time to read to the children," she remembered each year the birthday of her daughter-in-law's grandmother, she sent us all letters and care packages wherever we were. Each week, my grandmother volunteered in the nursery at church, holding the babies that were sometimes her grandchildren and often not. When the babies were us, my mother was especially glad; as one of the memories my mother wrote down recounts, she couldn't have kept us on breastmilk without my grandmother there to manage the refrigeration, the heating-up. I had written in that "cooking is fun because grandma lets us eat the leftover dough, just a tiny bit cause it always has an egg in it," and that, even though my cousin was tidy when we all cooked together, I wasn't. All my grandmother asked, I wrote down so long ago, was that I wash my hands and try not to lick my fingers so much. I struggle to define my relationship with my grandmother. She never seemed like an authority figure, and as far as I can tell she didn't want to be. She asked us what we needed and really listened to our answers. She loved big hugs and reading us books and *being* with us, and we loved being with her. When I first read *Solidarity with Children,* I was struck over and over by the presence of my grandmother in the pages. She did have solidarity with us. I had tried to capture this

unnameable relationality when I wrote the words for her service, falling to friendship when other words failed me:

> … it took me getting a lot older to realise that she was a lot more than 'just' my grandmother: she was one of my very first friends, someone who embodied the importance of fierce advocacy for not only those we love, but for those we do not yet know, those we have not yet met, those who will also need our time, our respect, our love, and our care. (2025, *To Ba-ma*)

I have thought quite a lot about friendship. Friends have been monumental in my own life; I have conceptualised them elsewhere as having resistive dynamics,[16] and I return often to Alva Gotby's work on the politics of friendship.[17] Lane-McKinley turns to Gotby, too, writing that,

> … whether as distant memories or in experiences that feel incredibly present, and even reactivated by the relationships we sustain, we can take from these moments [of friendship] the raw materials of a better collective life. With our friends, briefly yet beautifully, we remake the world.[18]

When she died, the funeral home posted an obituary on Facebook. I read through the comments hungrily. Her students from decades before had commented on their love for her, for my grandmother when she cared for them, for when she was Mrs. Avery the schoolteacher. She was, almost exclusively, the only babysitter I ever had. She picked us up for school when my mom went back to work, or just because it was Wednesday and that was the day she brought us cinnamon rolls from the bakery or took us to Dairy Queen for Blizzards. She hosted the 'Tuesday School' church childcare annual picnic each year in her backyard, cartons of Minute Maid Lemonade stocked in the fridge, kids crawling and running across the green grass, riding tricycles like my dad had on that same driveway so many years before. My grandmother was the hardest working person I know, and I never even knew her when she was engaged in paid work. As far as I can tell, *all* of her labours were regenerative, were reproductive, both inside and outside of her own household.[19]

I can't reasonably believe such labour (such love?) was easy for her, unless she really did have those fairies as my mother suspected. My dad had written in a memory for her 70th birthday that he remembered comforting her in her "laundry room retreat, when raising four children became overwhelming." I had wondered, but barely been able to picture, if she had ever felt the need to hide away, take a break from the laundry-list of life-making we all remembered together on her seventieth birthday. She read with us, pushed us on swings, played board games and card games, taught us piano, sang us to sleep, rocked us to sleep, fed us endlessly, listened to us talk on and on. She ordered me clothes out of a catalogue, sent them back or hemmed them if I didn't like the way they felt on my body. She handed me a different catalogue for books. I circled each one I wanted to read in pencil and they arrived days later, a stack as high as the ones we would check out from our local library together.

My parents weren't sure, at first, what would be on those home videos. The tapes had been in our basement for decades, our VCR player long retired. To have in my hands thirteen minutes of my grandmother reading out small pockets of stories we had written to her, each hinging on the very labour that I've spent years reading about, felt like something long and whisperingly elusive had finally become tangible. Emma Heaney,

theorising from and with gestation, notes in her introduction that her "book is about something very ordinary."[20] I suppose that is what became tangible: in the ordinary, here she was, here we were. I've come to think that what my grandmother did so well, even when it was surely difficult, was *mothering* itself. Mothering, in Madeline Lane-McKinley's words, "is a gerund, both a noun and a verb—or … a verb breaking out of a noun." That is, the particularities of the social reproductive labour of my grand*mother* is embedded in the noun but does not find its limits there. She was not, after all, *my* mother; I have a mother, a mother who mothers me and who was also mothered by my grandmother, probably as soon as she started dating my dad at age nineteen. Rather, my grandmother was an expert practitioner in the mothering labour that so many around her needed. She met our vast needs, she anticipated them.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs understands 'mother' "more as a possible action, a technology of transformation that those people who do the most mothering labour are teaching us right now."[21] I thought often, as I was writing and thinking, of the mahi of my friend Arianna Nisa-Waller, mostly taught to me in kōrero together as she finished her thesis, in voice memos to each other or over coffees. Arianna writes of te pīkau, drawing pīkau past the physical act of carrying—"the carrying of pēpi by our tūpuna"—and draws out a "wider system of caregiving grounded in whakapapa relationships, collective responsibility, and the close physical and emotional connection between pēpi and their whānau."[22] Her writing, thinking and friendship provokes "… a philosophy of connection, protection and belonging that situates tamariki within a wider network of relationships to people, place and memory … [which] challenges Western assumptions that mothering is the sole domain of mothers and instead highlights the relational breadth of whānau."[23]

I do not mean here to defang or deradicalise Gumbs' writing on revolutionary Black mothering or displace Arianna's acute focus on te ao Māori and whānau through exploring the mothering labour of my (white, American) grandmother. Rather, I am trying here to position moments of mothering labour against that which is assumed known, against that which has oppressed and constrained these very perspectives I draw on now. [24] I seek to orient from the everyday the love and relationalities that, to me, are unable to settle within the language of oppression and constraint alone. Approaching 'mother' as 'to mother' alters the terrain of the atomised, nuclear family and disintegrates its gendered constraints. Lane-McKinley hopes that—believes that—"we can all be mothers."[25] She wonders if the experience of caring—even for just one night—for an infant could "bring us closer to fathoming how to care for each other collectively, in concrete terms, not just abstractions."[26] Such care, she writes, would not only be extraordinarily helpful to parents, but it could teach us what it means to care for each other. I am interested in these concrete terms, in the knowledge of how many hours upon hours my grandmother held newborns—her own children, her grandchildren, and strangers alike. I think of how my dad shared a story about riding his tricycle down to their neighbour's house, a large parcel of chewing tobacco in tow to deliver to him from my grandmother. Aaron Jaffe, writing on social reproduction, notes that Marx himself considered tobacco as a plausible necessity for maintenance of labour power. I suppose I could understand this memory as yet more of my grandmother's reproductive labour, of the making and re-making of workers themselves for capitalism, for the man down the street with no wife to fetch his tobacco. Yet I return once more to the dialectic; she cared for him, as she taught my father to care for others, too. When is it love?

MEMORY

I had thought, in the years since my grandmother moved out of the white house on Peaks Street that I still dream of each week from my bed oceans away, that maybe the dementia would make the losing of my grandmother easier. Maybe I was losing her at a pace that my body could hold. It didn't feel like that when I got the call to say that she was gone, though. I lost it. My partner drove home when I called him and found me still gasping for breath and sobbing. Two days before she died, I had messaged my partner that I wished I could talk to her properly again, that I could use her advice, her particular kind of love. It was late winter in Ōtepoti and daffodils had just come up through the frost in our backyard when she died. Early spring at my grandmother's was marked by hours of daffodil-picking, and I cried again when they bloomed near what would have been her birthday.

I had thought of her often when reading feminist theory over the years, wishing I could ask her about her life-before-me that, in the gentle narcissism of childhood, I had thought of relatively little. She lost her husband in an accident in 1970 when her youngest child, my father, was five years old. She raised four children after this loss. She went back to teaching alongside mothering. She didn't remarry until 1987, when each of her children had left the house, in a marriage that was ostensibly set up by my grandfather's late wife, who knew my grandmother would take care of him. (She was right. My grandmother had lunch on the table for my grandfather, her second husband, promptly at noon each day, and dinner at six.) By the time I came along, though, this was all background noise: she was, to me, fully and wholly *my grandmother*. The questions only came later, when it felt too late: What was it like, raising four children on your own in the 1960s, 70s, 80s? What did you think of feminism? Did you ever read feminist pamphlets like the one I've found in archives? What advice did you give your friends? What advice did they give you? What did you think about your second marriage, being a wife again? What do you think about men? What do you think of what I write, what I teach?

I still have these questions and have searched for small fractal answers in the hours of home video footage that my mother pulled from the basement, digitised, and then sent through a few months after my grandmother's death. It was only in writing for her memorial service, though, that I realised that she had already given me answers to the questions I hadn't thought to ask. Her life had fundamentally *made* mine. My politics, my friendships, the time spent with my friends' children, the food I make, the hobbies I nurture, the books I read and read—all are mediated through the constellation of her seemingly endless care, her endless labours. New questions: When was it love for you? When was it labour? When was it both?

> She made it all ours, she held it for all of us. I can't imagine the labour of this making. When I think 'labours of love,' I think of my grandmother … Was everyone not taught what a sweet pea looked like by Grandma responding, when I asked what the pretty pink flower was called, that it had the same name as her name for me? (2025, *To Ba-Ma*)

I read these words aloud at 3 a.m. Aotearoa-time, over a WhatsApp audio call set to speaker, turned up loud. We had tried to connect FaceTime to a Bluetooth speaker, but it didn't work. My partner and I propped his phone up, muted and on FaceTime with my mother, so that I could see a small rectangle of green grass, blue sky, grey gravestones and parts of my extended family's faces lit by the Virginia morning sun.

> I won't give a lecture now, though I know if Grandma were still here she would listen for as long as I was wanting or needing to talk. What I want to say about this focus of mine is that to study social reproduction is to study life-making, is to study the care that we give to each other, to study how we make the very people that make up all of our lives … My grandmother Tinkie was the ultimate life-maker: she fed us, held us, and made us into exactly who we are. (2025, *To Ba-ma*)

A few weeks after my grandmother's memorial service, I FaceTimed my mother to find her at a family gathering (much rarer in my grandmother's absence), a birthday party for my cousin's toddler. My three cousins and I diverge greatly in our politics, particularly illuminated in the lead up to the 2016 United States presidential election. I haven't spoken to my eldest cousin since a particularly fraught Facebook comment he left on a post I made in 2016. The exact text of the comment has been lost to time(lines), but the central message was an acute displeasure that I had 'left my conservative roots' and had no understanding of the 'real world.' I think I laughed it off at the time (he had always aimed for me when we played dodgeball at our grandmother's, we had never been close) and didn't respond. I did respond, once, to his younger sister's post that prayed to God to bless President Trump. We *had* been close; as the youngest in her family, she was the closest to my age and my very best friend all through our childhood. We had 'girls' night' sleepovers together at our grandmother's house, dealt Uno every day at lunch with our uncle, played piano together, and sat at our very own table during Sunday dinners. It was 2020 and I didn't know—still don't, really—how to understand how the fragments of our lives had collided and scattered in such disparate ways.

My mom handed the phone to my middle cousin. We hadn't spoken in years. Uncharacteristically sincere, he told me he was glad he got the opportunity to talk to me face to face—he wanted to tell me that he really appreciated what I read at our grandmother's service. I had gotten it all right, gotten *her* all right. His sister came on to say the same, had read her own piece aloud at the service where she traced some of those very same memories, pulled on those lingering threads of our lives once together. I thought after, somewhat ruefully, that the Marxist-feminist origins of the social reproduction that shaped the narrative of my memories would have been cause for a great rift in my family should it have been more explicit. 'Marxist' is not an unburdened term in America. Yet, here we were, in brief political harmony over the caring labour—extended to kin and stranger in need alike—of Grandma Tinkie. Judith Butler writes that

> many people think that grief is privatising, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticising. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order … by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorising fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.[27]

In remembering my grandmother, in remembering her mothering, I felt perhaps a spark of Butler's "complex order." This is not to say that my MAGA cousins will soon become card-carrying communists—far from it. In my more cynical moments, I see only the rigid acceptance of atomised families: *my* family must be safe, and *their* family is their own concern; *my* kid is safe, *your* kid is your own problem. But for even just a little while, I felt like that fundamental dependency on mothering was understood by us all. My aunt, my grandmother's first child and only daughter, texted me in the days after the memorial service: she had gotten a written copy of what I had read aloud and read it to herself.

I had talked about a song my grandmother had sang to me. I couldn't remember all of the words, nor the name of the song—the memory more felt than meticulously recorded. My grandmother, my aunt's mother, had sang her the same one, she wrote to me, and it was called "You're Just in Love" by Irving Berlin. She loved it, too. My dad's cousin, my grandmother's nephew, who grew up a gay kid in 1960s Bedford County, wrote to me that the "tribute … brought back lots of memories because our generation also experienced the same loving and generous woman who knew how to make a kid feel seen and understood." What could these tangles of love and labour look like if we could only

> … resist resolving the shocking vulnerability of the neonate into a story about our capacity to ensure the safety of *our* children. Care for the most fragile form of life can be a skill that scales up and generalises to a personal ethos and a collective social principle. Reverence for singularity is simply distinct from the valorisation of the individual. To spend days that heap into years devoted to the children you care for is not at odds with your care for all children.[28]

There are contradictions here that need not be "at odds." Some part of what I learned from my grandmother is that, though the capacity may wane, love doesn't run out. Years into dementia, often unspeaking, my grandmother still tried to push over her food to me, somehow asking me "are you hungry" like she had for my whole life. My grandfather once complained that she rarely spoke when he visited her in the dementia ward. But when the grandchildren visited, when the children visited, she struggled against her mind and body to engage, in rare words and expressions reminding us who we—she, and us—were. "Well, that's just wonderful," she told me from that hospital-style bed, when I grasped her hand and told her that without the books she gave me growing up I could have never finished a PhD. She never failed to show us that we mattered, that the people we meet matter, that *together* matters. I hope she knew what she was to us, what she continues to be to us. That 2002 video made me think that she did know, decades before she herself needed an altogether different-and-the-same care in the dementia ward: my mother putting fresh daffodils beside her bed even on the days her eyes barely opened, holding her hand and singing her favourite hymns. After she had finished reading the memories we gave her for her birthday, she looked right into the camera, looking into my eyes across the bounds of time and death and life and variant technologies, and sent comfort into my bones that she *did* know: "Well, I feel like Julie Andrews in the *Sound of Music*. Somewhere along the way, I guess I did something right."

WHEN IS IT LOVE?

The situation of women, Shulamith Firestone writes in *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1970 (the same year that my grandmother lost her husband and Marsha P. Johnson and Silvia Rivera had their conversation), has not changed significantly from what it ever was.[29] Some would argue that even then the argument was untrue or hyperbolic; more still may argue that women have witnessed many gains and wins in the 50-plus years since Firestone penned her work at the age of 25. Rights have been won, after all. The right to vote, to 'equal' work, to choose or deny pregnancy, have all been ostensibly written into (and then so easily out of) the law. We sometimes hear quiet promises of diminishing sexual harassment and violence, though I note the language of 'protecting women and girls' has been more recently used to distribute both transphobia and carcerality.[30]

Each right is couched, nestled in under-funded legislations, a reform or amendment to the 'mistakes' of a bigoted past, assumed long-gone. Each right, hard-won, is proffered as offering, an appeasement to the tantrums thought unnecessary and over-emotional, to be bestowed and maintained only if those in power agree that it is still necessary or deserved or righteous. The enclosures of gendered labour, in this age, are made to feel of our own design. We have babies, or we do not. We get a job, or we do not. The choices are our own, after all, and our own responsibility.[31] It is our fault if we feel exploited, if we cannot quite put words to why Silvia Federici's 1970s writing feels right out of a voice memo sent by a friend only yesterday. There are many reasons why the enclosures and borders of our gendered lives feel more coercive, more covert, than those we read about in the narrative jungle of history. We can trace the neoliberal policies, demise of the welfare state, backlash to feminist and anti-racist organising, late-stage capitalism and settler-colonial regimes, the COVID-19 pandemic and its laying-bare the 'crisis of care,' the emerging—emerged!—fascism. These are material events, marked by extreme inequity, exploitation and violence, grounded in long and brutal histories. "Perhaps," Heaney writes, after outlining these same (and other) dire conditions, "searching for gender freedom beyond the individual may feel too risky."[32] Yet these conditions also call—demand, even—the 'beyond.'

Nancy Fraser names our capitalist society as not experiencing a crisis of care, nor a care crisis. Instead, our crisis is more profound. We are experiencing—have been experiencing—a crisis of our system's ability to reproduce *itself*. As capitalism needs social reproduction, so too does its "unlimited accumulation … destabilise the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies."[33] This fundamental contradiction forms, for Fraser, an "indispensable" background condition of the capitalist economy, which "free-rides" on social reproductive activities.[34] In turn, these contradictions are managed through historically contingent, yet always gendered, distinctions between bodies. This systems critique shows the deep roots of capitalism in our very social order, indicating something rotten that constrains our collective capacities. To end capitalism therefore *must* mean "reimagining the gender order," [35] must mean telling stories that ask questions that are generative, speculative, transformative.

How could I explain the labour that my grandmother did in the vocabulary of oppression or exploitation alone? I felt aggrieved when I saw in a photo that her gravestone said only "loving wife" under her name. She loved more capaciously than 'wife' can possibly hold. She was an avid correspondent, a voracious reader and a lover of babies. She dug worms up for fishing with my little brother and always turned the lamp on for me as I read in my favourite chair at her house. She once let a garbage truck driver absolutely have it for driving too fast down the driveway where her grandchildren played. She didn't suffer fools, but she would still take care of them. Her mothering, her continuous caring labour for as long as her body and mind would allow her, meant something impossibly more. It meant that "we are not alone" and it taught me, too, that "what we feel for our children can amplify, diffuse and saturate. The feeling doesn't need to stay at home. The *us* that is reproduced when we care for a child can multiply until it's simply the sole stuff of our collective lives."[36]

She *was* a 'loving' wife, though, a wife twice over. Before marrying her second husband, Frank, (and the only grandfather I have ever known), my mom figured out there was "something going on" when she overheard my grandmother telling Frank that he might

as well tell her now how he liked his eggs cooked—she would be needing to know. She seemed to approach such courtship, such wife-relationality, with one part duty and two parts eye-roll. I remember her putting my grandfather's lunch on the table in front of him promptly at noon, making a face at me to bring me into a joke whose punchline lives somewhere in a feminist pamphlet. A nurse who had cared for her in the dementia ward commented on her Facebook obituary, writing of her love for my grandmother and then, in tongue-in-cheek text, that she was "feisty, too." I liked that. She was.

POTENTIALITIES, OR, COME ON IN

What is this potentiality that I witnessed, that we witnessed in the life my grandmother led? I know that we can love strangers because, as Heaney writes, each neonate is a stranger at first encounter.[37] I also know that we can love strangers because my grandmother showed me how to love. My grandmother was, whether she would have put it in such words or not, "committed to … the achievement of mothering,"[38] to that crucial verb-form of *mother*. The provision and reception of such care, of such mothering, should not be—or more importantly, *does not have to be*—foreclosed by gender as it is shaped by capitalism.

I do not trace in this writing an 'insurgent' social reproduction, like those in the barracks of protest M.E. O'Brien describes—that social reproductive labour which happens in solidarities outside of more immediate biogenetic ties.[39] When I think of insurgent social reproduction I think to the people of Minnesota, organising diaper deliveries to immigrant families as they sheltered in their homes as ICE invaded their hometown, of Palestinians making lives even as bombs fall. I think of all the small and large ways people insist on life even as it is under attack. My grandmother's mothering labour, at least in relation to me, does not on paper trouble the usual boundaries of the family, nor of gender itself. Her life's work *was* fundamentally the labour of that fiction of 'woman'; it concealed the "reality 'women.'"[40] Yet there is something unnameable in the kinships she reproduced, something that means that if we start from this mothering labour, these labours of love, from what we have now, we can see more clearly that "kinship is always made, not given."[41]

We can understand care and kinship and gender as always-made and thus endless in its possibilities. I turn often to the speculative fiction *Everything for Everyone,* written in exquisite form by O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi.[42] The project imagines a future that I could suddenly taste—the children in their speculative future-world do not understand the boundaries and cruelties of the past that govern so many lives in our present. It is not naïve to think that this world is possible, not when you know other people can taste it, too. [43] The ways that I have made sense of this desire, these tastes, can only come from those feminist arguments that write towards gender liberation, those feminisms that prioritise life-making labour and seek to communise care, rather than constrain its boundaries and assign its work to certain bodies.

Over the time that I wrote this piece, I often listened to the radio on low in the background. One evening I was curious to hear, in that muted background noise, the words "macaroni and cheese." I paused and tuned in. Karima Moyer-Nocchi, the author of *The Epic History of Macaroni and Cheese,* was being interviewed about her research on RNZ.[44] I listened as she traced macaroni and cheese from Ancient Rome

to its modern iterations in the United States. My grandmother's macaroni and cheese was my favourite in the world, which meant it appeared often on the counter, that soft yellow colour beckoning from between the cranberry casserole and steamed broccoli. I have a photo of the recipe card, in my mother's handwriting, that I no longer need to refer to. I make it often: when my friend's mother passed away; when my friend had a baby; when I feel melancholy or in need of comfort. I have sent that photographed recipe on to friends who need to feed large groups of kids. My grandmother's macaroni and cheese, making the rounds of the South Island of Aotearoa, another migration to add to the ones Moyer-Nocchi described to me through the radio waves. Heaney writes, in prose that soothes and stirs my grief, that

> … the fact is that we are not forever. Our bodies, the infrastructures of our sensoria, have emerged in history and will exit history. But our participation in the real movement of history is a kind of forever. We came from something or rather into something that was already happening. We participated and flavoured the terms of what will come after. We change and precipitate change in others. History at every level is in process, is gestational.[45]

The questions that I grapple with here are not questions that I seek to settle in an essay alone, nor could I settle them alone at all. Rather, I explore these questions in a method that unfurled after my grandmother died and I spent time with archives of our life. From these archives, I trace a feminism that neither subscribes nor clings to the essentialism of gender as it centres life-making, drawing on the "anti-essentialism that has too often been misconstrued as essentialism."[46] This is the feminism that I turn to, that keeps speaking to me from pages and from memories, that continues to demand a future where such care is not privatised, where the provision and reception of care is not bound to the labour of a certain gendered body. Kathi Weeks, writing towards feminist futures, notes that such work requires the long-game, and that, though we may be "among the agents that help to bring that different future into being," we may not ever be the "subjects fully desirous of that world."[47] She writes elsewhere of a "being of becoming," of active (feminist) subjects that contest even as they constrain, that seek to desire otherwise even as their lives (and imaginations) may be grounded in the now.[48] I hope we can desire towards "that" world, that world that *could* end capitalism and stretch for the possibilities of care stripped of its gendered confines, that understands that "we are of and for each other,"[49] that "we are undone by each other,"[50] that we make each other *and* can welcome and transform this making, even long after we are gone from this place. I hope we seek to live and embody this in our being and our becoming. I think more people are desirous of this world than they know or admit, even if only in dreams and in moments. Maybe we feel at risk of naivete. Maybe a utopian vision strapped to a scaled-up critique starting from relational lives asks for 'too much.' We can struggle in the long project of transforming our world, our very relationalities and gender itself, by perhaps just being even a little bit like my Grandmother Tinkie, standing in the doorway, arms wide open, saying "well, come on in!"

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2. Madeline Lane-McKinley, *Solidarity with Children: An Essay against Adult Supremacy* (Haymarket Books, 2025), 65.
3. Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (Verso Books, 2022); Angela Y. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (Penguin UK, 2022); Emma Heaney, *Feminism against Cisness*, (Duke University Press, 2024); Kim TallBear et al., "Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family," *Queerly Canadian: An Introductory Reader in Sexuality Studies*, ed. Scott Rayer and Laine Halpern Zisman (Women's Press, Canadian Scholars, 2022), 18–28; Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (Pluto books, 2017); Alva Gotby, *They Call It Love: The Politics of Emotional Life* (Verso Books, 2023); Emma Heaney, *This Watery Place: Four Essays on Gestation*, 1st ed. (Pluto Press, 2025), JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.33676960; Alva Gotby, "Friends against Capitalism: Family Abolition as a Politics of Friendship," *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, no. 1 (2022): 112–16.
4. Heaney, *Feminism against Cisness*, 4.
5. Ibid.
6. Aaron Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory and the Socialist Horizon: Work, Power and Political Strategy* (Pluto Books, 2020), 122.
7. Ibid, 124.
8. Heaney, *Feminism against Cisness*, 5–6.
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11. Lane-McKinley, *Solidarity with Children*, 65.
12. Kathi Weeks, *Constituting Feminist Subjects* (Cornell University Press, 1998).
13. Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 3.
14. Ibid, 3.
15. Lane-McKinley, *Solidarity with Children*, 70.
16. Peyton Bond, "'We Have Each Other's Backs': Friendship as Resistance in Feminized Labor," *Feminist Studies* 50, no. 3 (2025): 406–32.
17. Gotby, "Friends against Capitalism: Family Abolition as a Politics of Friendship."
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19. Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, 1–2.
20. Heaney, *This Watery Place*, xii.
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22. Arianna Nisa-Waller, "Pīkau Ki Tua: Honouring Indigenous Parenting and Whānau Wellbeing Journeys in Aoteaora" (PhD thesis, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, 2026), 5.
23. Nisa-Waller, "Pīkau Ki Tua, 6.
24. Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (Pluto Books, 2020).
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46. Heaney, *Feminism against Cisness*.
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