



Colonial Innovations or Collective Futures? Jennifer Denbow's *Reproductive Labor and Innovation*

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BOOK REVIEW



ABSTRACT

Jennifer Denbow's 2024 book: *Reproductive Labor and Innovation: Against the Tech Fix in an Era of Hype*, seeks to uncover the forces at play in the current moment of the gig economy in which hyper-individualistic "innovations" are praised while reproductive and caring labor is further undervalued. Denbow intervenes in the economics of neoliberal "innovation" with Marxist feminist work on reproductive labor and social reproduction to paint a clearer picture of why, in an era of tech innovation boom, there is actually a hollowing out of resources for reproductive labor, rather than more investment in reproductive labor as a means toward "innovative," or better, futures. To illuminate this divide, Denbow offers the concept of "the innovation/reproduction binary," which illustrates the phenomenon of the overvaluing of innovation often coexisting with the undervaluing of reproductive labor, offering such examples as digital care work platforms and new, venture capitalist funded IVF technologies. As a volume, *Reproductive Labor and Innovation* weaves together the at first seemingly unrelated topics of tech innovation and reproductive labor in order to complicate the notion that what we need for reproductive labor is more optimized technology, but rather to shift away innovation itself as a solution for care.

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Jennifer Denbow's 2024 book: *Reproductive Labor and Innovation: Against the Tech Fix in an Era of Hype*, is an analysis of how we came to this late capitalist moment in which the overvaluation of individualistic "innovation" works to blur the importance of reproductive labor, which in turn leads to resources being funneled into innovations and away from reproductive labor. The book opens with an anecdote of Denbow writing the book from her university office, while, out her window, she watched a new Center for Research and Innovation being constructed, towering over her own liberal arts building. The epilogue of the text closes with Denbow noting how the COVID-19 pandemic, which was happening while she wrote the book, widened the gap between the individualism of the gig economy and collective social movements. In between these anecdotes of the construction of the center for innovation and the isolation of the pandemic is *Reproductive Labor and Innovation*. Denbow skillfully intertwines an analysis of the economics of innovation with Marxist feminist work on reproductive labor and social reproduction to paint a clearer picture of why, in an era of tech innovation boom, there is actually an active *devaluation* of reproductive labor, rather than more investment in reproductive labor as a means toward "innovative," or better, futures. To illuminate this divide, Denbow offers the term "the innovation/reproduction binary": "the dialectical relationship between the fetishization of innovation and the devaluation of reproductive labor, which reveals how innovation has been constructed as a panacea to social ills."¹ This binary, for Denbow, functions to mask the colonial and capitalist logics behind neoliberalism.²

Though one might assume otherwise by reading the subtitle "Against the Tech Fix," this is not a book that argues against reproductive technologies. Denbow is clear that reproductive technologies currently serve the desirable purposes of allowing people who cannot conceive to become parents, and challenging gender norms and the hegemony of the nuclear family.³ However, Denbow reveals the colonial and eugenic ideologies baked into a lot of the "innovative" reproductive technologies of today, which she argues is not worth ignoring for the sake of greater access.⁴ This book is particularly relevant following the June 2022 Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*: the constitutional right to privacy for pregnant people as they decide whether to end their pregnancy via abortion. Though feminists have argued even since before the days of *Roe* that privacy is not enough to achieve Reproductive Justice,⁵ the elimination of this federal protection exacerbates the already-unequal status of who can access abortion, and suggests implicitly that people who can become pregnant act on an individual basis when it comes to preventing or ending a pregnancy. In the same way that there are notions of neoliberal individualism baked into the "right to privacy," Denbow argues in this book that individualism is a driving logic for capitalist innovation.

The introduction to the book introduces the innovation/reproduction binary, and the four chapters that follow each examine a particular "innovation" that interacts with reproduction. Each of the examples in the four chapters also add complexity to the innovation/reproduction binary that is set up at the beginning of the text, troubling the idea that the binary is discrete

1 Denbow 3.

2 Denbow 135.

3 Denbow 136.

4 Denbow 137.

5 The concept of reproductive justice (RJ), was coined by SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective in the early 1990s, and is defined as "the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities." Activists and scholars have since added to this definition to include the right for people capable of pregnancy to express their gender identity while choosing to parent or not parent, as well as raise children in a healthy, safe environment.

See: "Reproductive Justice" *SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective*, 2018. <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice>. and

Patricia Zavella, "Reproductive Justice Activism in the Post- Dobbs Era." *Feminist Anthropology* 4, no. 2 November 2023, 139.

or straightforward. Chapter 1 offers some historical context for the innovation/reproduction binary by examining how colonial logics around labor have led to this moment of innovation, which is highlighted by a recounting of Denbow's visit to the Bezos Center for Innovation's installation at the Seattle Museum of History and Industry. The second chapter focuses on social reproduction via innovation education in schools, as well as through the gig economy's extension to digital care work platforms like [Care.com](https://www.care.com). Finally, the third and fourth chapters examine biotechnology and its troubled relationship to disability, and emerging fertility technologies. Though the chapter all focus on different topics that exemplify different ways that innovation interacts with reproduction, the structuring of the book is effective in showing how various aspects of reproduction— including reproductive labor, social reproduction, and pregnancy and fertility— all hold up to the logic of this binary. Denbow achieves this by building on both critical examinations of neoliberal economics,⁶ Reproductive Justice⁷ and disability scholarship⁸ and Marxist feminist analyses of reproductive labor,⁹ offering a unique perspective at the intersections of these schools of thought.

Three other concepts are central to the arguments of the book— those of the “tech fix,” neoliberal eugenics, and interdependence versus individualism. These themes each work to flesh out the relationship between reproduction and innovation that Denbow argues for in the book.

The idea of the “tech fix,” featured in the subtitle of the book, is the shorthand term that Denbow uses to describe the impact of late capitalism, and in particular the gig economy, on reproductive labor. Using the examples of digital care work platforms such as [Care.com](https://www.care.com), which treat work such as childcare and elderly care as a “gig” that one can take on in a similar way as Uber or DoorDash, Denbow argues that, rather than making care work more accessible, as the companies advertise,¹⁰ they actually further hollow out protections for care laborers. Care laborers are asked in this setting to see themselves as morally upstanding entrepreneurs by marketing themselves as trustworthy and empathetic.¹¹ In turn, this “innovation” for reproductive care labor actually reinforces the innovation/reproduction binary in the sense that it “obscures the power relations that structure reproductive labor and also does nothing to help— and even may make worse— the poor wages of care workers.”¹²

In addition to care labor, Denbow also examines fertility technologies as a site of the innovation/reproduction binary. She uses the term “neoliberal eugenics” to illustrate how colonial logics of the default human being a “rational” European man have made their way into technologies

6 Becker, Gary S. *A Treatise on the Family: Enlarged Edition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022.
Brown, Wendy. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.7312/brow19384>.

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7 Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice. “A New Vision for Advancing Our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights, and Reproductive Justice.” 2005.

Davis, Dána-Ain. *Reproductive Injustice: Racism, Pregnancy, and Premature Birth*. New York: nyu Press, 2019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479812271.001.0001>.

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Ross, Loretta J., and Rickie Solinger. *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520963207>.

8 Arani, Alexia. “Mutual Aid and Its Ambivalences: Lessons from Sick and Disabled Trans and Queer People of Color.” *Feminist Studies* 46, no. 3 (2020): 653–62. <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.46.3.0653>.

Boris, Eileen, and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas. *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.

Rapp, Rayna, and Faye Ginsburg. “Enabling Disability: Rewriting Kinship, Reimagining Citizenship.” *Public Culture* 13, no. 3 (2001): 533–56. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-13-3-533>.

9 Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, and Selma James. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. 2d ed. Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1973.

Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland, CA: pm Press, 2012.

Fraser, Nancy. “Legitimation Crisis? On the Political Contradictions of Financialized Capitalism.” *Critical Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 157–89. <https://doi.org/10.1086/683054>.

Lewis, Sophie. *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family*. London: Verso, 2019.

10 Denbow 73.

11 Denbow 58, 75.

12 Denbow 58.

such as advanced prenatal genetic testing for conditions such as down's syndrome¹³ and attempts to genetically engineer qualities such as intelligence, which, according to Denbow, sell parents a "neoliberal model of care" that puts the pressure on parents to produce rational human beings. This not only carries deeply eugenicist implications, but it overly individualizes the responsibility to make reproductive decisions while glossing over the reality that these technologies are only available to wealthy elites while poor and nonwhite patients increasingly struggle to get basic reproductive healthcare.¹⁴ These "emerging speculative technologies" are largely funded by venture capitalists, notably Nick Bostrom and Martin Varsavsky, who subscribe to the school of philosophical thought of existential risk, or "X-risk," which is defined as a "utilitarian school of thought that speculates about catastrophic future events that would wipe out humanity"¹⁵ While neoliberal eugenics is described separately from X-riskers in this book, certainly X-risk and its role in reproductive technology startups outlined by Denbow here can be thought of as an extension of neoliberal eugenics.

Denbow concludes the book with a call for seeing care and reproductive labor as inherently interdependent as a means of challenging innovation. She states, "The myth of independence is often wrapped up in the discourse of innovation: the idea that innovations emanate from lone brilliant individuals covers over the social roots and character of any creative discovery. Emphasizing interdependence can therefore help to counter the ideology of innovation."¹⁶ Drawing on prominent theorizations of care as something that reveals humans to be interdependent,¹⁷ Denbow argues that "tech fixes" such as digital care work platforms encourage workers to see themselves as independent entrepreneurs rather than "come together as workers" who share a "collective responsibility to one another."¹⁸ This kind of collective support, according to Denbow, could take many forms, from state funding for reproductive labor to radical care collectives.¹⁹ She ends the book with a call for collective support for reproductive labor as a means toward "a future focused more on reproduction than innovation."²⁰

As a volume, *Reproductive Labor and Innovation* weaves together the at first seemingly unrelated topics of tech innovation and reproductive labor in order to complicate the notion that what we need for reproductive labor is more optimized technology, but rather to shift away innovation itself as a solution for care. While I was left wishing that Denbow offers more concrete solutions in the conclusion of the text, I think this leaves open a rich space for other feminist scholars to intervene in. Furthermore, while Denbow utilizes some in-person research methods (particularly in describing her visit to the Bezos innovation museum exhibit), this text would have benefited from a more clearly stated methodological framework, which would make the work easier for other scholars to build on. In this post-*Roe v. Wade* moment, in which reproductive health is increasingly being offered as sacrifice for political agendas, and in which there is a collective spike in anxiety about what effects an unregulated internet will have on marginalized communities,²¹ this book offers a timely opportunity to reframe needed dialogues in both arenas, and would therefore be just as worthwhile a read for scholars of neoliberal economics or Marxist feminisms as it would be for people who study reproductive health access or technology's impact on society.

13 Denbow 84–85.

14 Denbow 123.

15 Denbow 119.

See: Andréa Becker, "Elon Musk's Feud With Grimes Is a Warning" *Slate* (16 Oct. 2023) <https://slate.com/technology/2023/10/elon-musk-grimes-babies-pronatalism-research.html>.

Charisma Madarang, "Elon Musk and Tucker Carlson Discuss the Urge to Impregnate Women" *Rolling Stone* (18 Apr. 2023) <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/elon-musk-tucker-carlson-fox-birth-control-abortion-1234717505/>.

16 Denbow 144–145.

17 Tronto, Joan C. *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York: NYU Press, 2013.
 Piepzn-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018.

18 Denbow 142.

19 Denbow 147.

20 Denbow 149.

21 See: Justine Calma, "Donald Trump's EPA pick wants to 'make America the AI capital of the world'" *The Verge* (12 Nov. 2024) <https://www.theverge.com/2024/11/12/24294483/donald-trump-ai-data-center-epa-lee-zeldin>.

RELATION TO ISSUE THEME

This book fits within the social sciences subfields of reproductive labor, Marxist feminisms, and critical technology studies and offers an interdisciplinary approach to reproductive technology in the post-Roe v. Wade era.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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