

Male Pregnancies, Exowombs, and the Meltdown Between Hetero- and Homonormativity

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I first heard about Mpreg, short for male pregnancy, while dining with a group of strangers at a first-floor clandestine Chinese restaurant in Lisbon. I was commissioned to write a text for a young artist, in whose honor the dinner was being held, about an animal I had wrongly imagined as intersexed, but which in reality suffers from a condition called neoteny—the retention of infantile features into adulthood. In a way, then, queerness was already on the table, and the subject of Mpreg, once it came up, shouldn't have come as a surprise.

The large circular table barely fit the room, and the nine or ten of us could hardly move our chairs, squishing on the greasy linoleum floor. One window opened onto Lisbon's most multicultural square; the other to a funky back alley. I was exchanging glances with the young artist on the opposite side of the table—with whom I'd become amorously involved months later—while eavesdropping the Dutch guy sitting next to me, and soon enough I was deep into a discussion about male pregnancy no less.

Now this guy was bro and brutish, not at all someone I'd expect to be into gender issues. My fault for judging him, for he was in fact making a living writing gay Mpreg novellas and full-length novels sold as eBooks on Amazon and other more subcultural websites, such as the literal mpregbooks.com—and what could be queerer than that. Mpreg, I learned, is an online subgenre of literature and fan art whereby cis gay men can get pregnant. The genre follows strict codes of gay culture, particularly the roles and performativities played by each character: one man is almost always top and masc, the “alpha,” while the other bottom and effeminate, the “omega;” sometimes there are also “betas,” who help “alphas” get their “omega.” Predictably, it's the bottom who always gets pregnant, belly and all.

Mpreg stories and imagery goes well beyond the classic 1994 movie *Junior*, wherein Arnold Schwarzenegger gets pregnant and gives birth, Joan Rivers's 1978 *Rabbit Test*, wherein it's Billy Crystal's turn, and Jacques Demy's 1973 *A Slightly Pregnant Man*, with Marcello Mastroianni getting pregnant due to overeating hormone-rich chicken. To my knowledge these are the only Western cinematic commercial Mpreg stories to date. Well beyond these movies' hetero tongue in cheek humor, online Mpreg is wildly imaginative, venturing into all sorts of genres. Stories can take place in the real world or in fantasy universes populated by aliens, vampires, angels, pirates—what have you. Predictably, on the side of fantasy, animals take a prominent role, with alphas shapeshifting into wolves or bears, betas into foxes, and omegas into cubs, among many less homonormative animalities—penguins, for example. Sometimes men may even need to shift into an animal form in order to give birth—quite revealing of an animalistic portrayal of birthing.

Quenching my enthusiasm, however, my conversant promptly replied that there wasn't much space for innovation in the genre. While the setting may shift wildly, along with

fertilization and pregnancy details, the plot remains strict. He had tried writing stories where the top gets pregnant, for example, in an attempt at reversing roles or introducing flexibility in the romance, but those simply didn't sell. As far as he could tell, Mpreg readers desire the norm, perhaps projecting themselves on expected roles, both homo and heteronormative. Still, I left the dinner curious and in the months ahead ended up reading more Mpreg eBooks than I would've imagined.

Not all Mpreg readers are men, gay or straight. Neither are its writers. Just like *yaoi*, the Japanese Manga and Anime boys love genre (BL), is mostly written by cis straight women for cis straight women, many Mpreg fans are women rather than gay men. In Vice's *Gaycation* series, Elliot Page visits Tokyo's Otome Road to meet two *fujoshi*. The term translates as "rotten girl" and is used for female fans of *yaoi*—*fujoshi* is homophonous with a word meaning women ruined for marriage, which is problematic to say the least. Curiously, many *fudanshi*, "rotten boys" who read *yaoi*, are also said to be straight, perhaps searching for an escape from the rigidity of Japan's masculine culture—but it's hard to tell, precisely due to homophobia in Japan. The women proceed on taking Elliot to a karaoke booth and listen in isolation to BL stories voiced, with pleasuring gasps and cum groans, by actors. Apparently, this is common practice among female fans of *yaoi*. When Page asks them why they enjoy it, the women answer, "We want to feel embarrassed listening to these boys do things."¹

I've only been to Japan once, on a short trip I got on a discount from Hong Kong, so my knowledge is mostly removed. Still I spent many of my days in Tokyo at Manga bookshops like

¹ In my single trip to Japan I didn't have much time to investigate the legitimacy of what the Internet says about both *fujoshi* and *fudanshi* with field interviews and meetings, as any serious researcher should. A good bibliographical reference is: *Boys' Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, ed. McLelland, Nagaike et al (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

the iconic Mandarake, flipping through my share of *yaoi* mangas and many erotic subgenres filled with a spectrum of human genders and nonhuman beings and parts of beings. Sadly, I didn't find any Japanese Mpreg and had to search for digital scans online later. The style, of course, exists, and Manga is even said to be at its origins.

I read Mpreg for pleasure and curiosity, but mostly for how it provides an insiders view on contemporary gay desire and its relation, or lack thereof, to feminism, transgender, and non-binary struggles. Mpreg could potentially harbor the conditions for decoupling gestation from gender, a longstanding feminist horizon, but it generally fails at it. While certain second wave feminists restricted their Marxist critiques of reproductive labor to household chores and childrearing, others, like Shulamith Firestone, made an enemy of gestation itself, seeing the biological carrying capacity of women as historically oppressive and even at the origins of sexual and gender division. The contrasting naturalness of m/m pregnancy could be a welcomed imagination to this debate, were it not for its utter disinterest with the history of reproductive and gestational labor. As such and regardless of its readership, it remains deeply engrained in misogyny and committed to normative power structures.

In its own way, Mpreg is revealing of the twists and turns of contemporary homonormativity. On the one hand, the liberal do-good married gay couple striving for an upper middle class family; on the other, subcultures of exacerbated muscular masculinity. The rise of these two gay figures in the past two decades came at the expense of violence towards fairies, queens, or simply femme identities. While the former erase the femme and the emasculate for how they threaten the liberal status quo with a memory of mainstream stereotyping, the latter

reject them for their visible fragility, associated with womanhood, or lack of sexual stamina: the twink can only be a bottom.

Contemporary homonormativity goes both ways. Either the acceptance model, mimicking the hetero dream of coupledness, the nuclear family, and reproductivity, that is, an obsession with having babies, preferably biologically via IVF and surrogacy. Or the replication of male dominance, with its attachment to fixed sexual roles, self-replicating without a minute's thought for those who gestate: people with uteruses.

Here again, Mpreg has something to say, even if for its silence. While the genre's decoupling of gestation from gender could provide escape routes from cisgendered norms and roles, there's little to no space in it for intersexuality or transgender and non-binary experiences. There's never a mention of trans men, for example. Nor of women who have zero desire for gestation and who may even feel dysphoric about it. Or of how gestation could, in the best of all possible worlds, be as fluid as gender. I'm not saying this is what Mpreg readers believe, only how it speaks to current gay desires and prejudices.

It's paradoxical to find cis gays desiring pregnancy when many are happily ignorant about, or worse, actually distaste, women's bodily health. The "Don't show me that vagina pic, that's gross!" attitude isn't funny; it simply reeks of cis male privilege—and it's up to cis gay men to unpack it. Unsurprising then that many Mpreg authors and readership show little to no interest in the biology of it all. There's a suspension of disbelief about the biology of pregnancy and birthing in the genre, the process being largely consigned to magic. Sure, there are anatomical drawings of male pregnancy, representations of bodily transformations, and sometimes even hormone therapy details. There are "ass babies" and C-sections. True enough, just like queerness needs no justification, why would pregnant men—or werewolves and

vampires for that matter? Fantasy serves its own liberatory purposes. But how can this utopia coexist with the fetishization of women’s hormonal cycles, whether cis or trans—in some stories the effeminate omega bottom goes through the “heat,” phases when he is at his horniest and most fertile—or the absolute silence on abortion rights?

Given the above, how could m/m pregnancy, in its perpetuation of biological offspring and gene fetishism ever compare to the utopia of artificial wombs, as imagined by Marge Piercy and Shulamith Firestone?

After a while I had to put my Mpreg readings to the side and go my way, but just like pregnant women sometimes say that once they get pregnant all they see are other pregnant women, I found male pregnancy references everywhere.

Come Christmas, I found myself buying a PS4 just to play Hideo Kojima’s much anticipated new videogame, *Death Stranding*; a game about a delivery man connecting, or “bridging” in the game’s grammar, isolated cities and outposts in a post-apocalyptic United States. Kojima’s visionary weirdness isn’t new.² But it’s not everyday that you see a manly actor like *Walking Dead*’s Norman Reedus carry a baby on a high-tech portable exo-womb across a barren, majestically-rendered landscape.

In the game’s first few moments, before your character Sam Porter Bridges “adopts” what is now one of the most famous babies in video gaming history, he is stopped in his tracks by BTs, “beached things,” ethereal yet viscous humanoid ghosts stranded between this world and the afterlife. Sam hides at the mouth of a cave, only to bump into Léa Seydoux’s Fragile who

² 1988s cyberpunk *Snatcher* ties together not one but two viral pandemics with a secret eugenic plan push forth by androids; 1990s second installment of the now famous *Metal Gear* series is set on an oil scarcity future whose only hope is a new algae-based energy source; while *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* range from environmental terrorism to a premonition of Internet surveillance.

addresses him as “the man who delivers”—and on I went, taken with the pun, excitedly believing Kojima had tapped into Mpreg fantasies, cheating Playstation bros, in all their engrained misogyny, into soothing a crying baby by desperately rocking the controller with their hands. While this, sadly, didn’t prove true, it is worth pausing for a moment to appreciate *Death Stranding*’s queer ecology.

Topping it all is BB, the “bridge baby” inside the amniotic jar. To call BB a baby is somewhat misguided; BB isn’t properly a fetus, in that it reacts, stares, cries, might even give you a thumbs up from inside its artificial womb, nor has it fully matured to leave its aquatic environment—it seems unclear if it’s ever meant to. Neither fetus nor baby, BBs are the only beings capable of sensing the ghostly BTs, and they’ll promptly start crying when in their presence, thus alerting Sam to the threat. The artificial womb is attached to Sam’s chest and throughout the game, as you walk across forests, rocky plains, swamps, and snowy peaks void of human soul, the two create a familial bond; BB going from an instrument of survival to a full-fledged subject, while Sam from an isolated and sentimentally anaesthetized individual to a caring parent of sorts.

Sam’s arch is intentional, even if the game’s deconstruction of the musculature of masculinity and its opposite male fragility may be accidental. Two traits of contemporary manhood are the fear of commitment and the privilege of men simply occupying too much physical and emotional space, with this erasing any other genders. Sam is a man who refuses to be physically touched, and who thus probably refrains from any sexual activity. He shows no libido and in fact the game tells us he suffers from aphenphosmophobia, an actual anxiety-inducing condition resulting from the fear of intimacy and being touched, both physically and emotionally, which is oftentimes the consequence of experiencing or witnessing sexual abuse. In

fact, after 40+ hours of gameplay, I believe BB is the only other human being Sam touches with his bare hands. It is interesting then that the game reverts a trauma too often attributed to women or fragility, and that the mechanism to do so is a man's capacity to carry a baby "frozen in time" inside an exo-womb held to his chest. Contrary to Mpreg, here a male's carrying capacity goes well beyond gestation; Sam doesn't need to gestate, only to create a bridge to BB. As Firestone and Piercy proclaimed, the introduction of artificial wombs unknots reproduction from coupledness and gestation from a uterus (womanhood being its historical signifier) relegating it instead to technology. In the end, both BB and its potential carrier are irrespective of gender. Still the womb is not left to itself, a sack waiting for nine months inside a laboratory; it must be cared for, creating a bond in the process.

In another scene, Sam helps a woman free herself from the ghost of her unborn baby, lost still in womb due to a rockslide. After the accident, the baby turned into an unharmed BT, hovering in mid-air, its umbilical cord still attached to the woman. This ghostly baby is a reminder of how bodily and psychological trauma always go hand in hand, and it is only with Sam's care that she gathers the strength to cut the spectral umbilical cord, a technique she then teaches him. Equipped with this item, Sam can henceforth free BTs by cutting their umbilical cords instead of battling them.

BT's are curious creatures. When suspended in mid-air they are ash-like specters, but when they grab Sam they reveal their oily materiality, dragging you scarily through a sudden lake of crude, gushing from the earth amidst old infrastructural reminders of a previous carbon economy, from cars to lampposts and warehouses. With this comes a torrent of oil-covered marine life, from crabs to cetaceans, and tentacular chimeras who try to drown you in the crude. When you die, Sam ends up in an underwater world, and you must guide his "soul" back to his

drowned body; the first person camera penetrates Sam's throat only to find deep inside his esophagus or stomach a joyful BB, who starts by showing you its buttocks, crammed between your own lubricated inner walls, then turn and open his eyes to give you a just suckled thumbs up, in what is simultaneously one of the game's most fun and disturbing scenes.

To my eyes, through its storytelling, worldbuilding, and gameplay *Death Stranding* does more service to themes abundant in contemporary art than many museum shows. For example, "timefall," the toxic rain that constantly washes the landscape, accelerating the decay and corrosion of anything it touches, from flesh to infrastructure like bridges and roads, speaks hauntingly to the unavailability of Climate Change and the slow violence of environmental toxicity. Or how later in the game Sam must retrieve a fossilized ammonite, only to find a ghostly umbilical cord connected to the geological find, with this opening up a series of cut scenes about the Earth's great extinctions, deep time, and life and non-life.

Death Stranding communicates strikingly not only a queer ecological landscape, but also a queer temporality connecting past, present, and future beyond linearity, where even the afterlife is part of the great chain of being. Nonetheless, a haunting feeling remains. Everything and everyone in the game is indeed stranded: BB in its artificial womb; BTs between life and death; Sam in his unshakeable masculinity; oil-covered whales in dark sandy beaches; and the planet between extinctions, in a Climate Change limbo, always postponed, always already here. Still, a sliver of hope remains: a *strand* is also a thin thread connecting to other places and possibilities.

Later in the summer I was gladly surprised when contestant Deborah Czeresko, a lesbian woman, won Netflix's competitive program *Blown Away*. This is a program about glassblowers. Every week the contestants are challenged with a topic they must respond to with a glass piece

conceptualized and executed under four stressful hours. The series captured me from the get go, with Czeresko's sassy, highbrow New York attitude making me miss New York more than I'd wish for. But it was her episode 4 artwork that made it for me: an exo-womb. In her own words:

“M-BITO is a prototype of an artificial womb. The robot would allow a person to carry a baby to term by connecting to them through an umbilical plug in the robot, thereby letting the fetus grow outside of a living body in a controlled environment that will supply nutrients and oxygen to nurture the embryo. The components of M-BITO are: amniotic tank, umbilical plug, control board, hi tech weight relieving straps.”³

She also stated, “This is one of the big issues for humanity. Total liberation of the sexes.” Exo-wombs for everyone indeed.

For some reason, I came out of *Mpreg* and *Death Stranding* with an obsession for astrobiologists' speculations about exoplanetary life, all while undergoing a deep self-reflection about the queer experiences in my earthly life. This led me to an intense period of poetry writing, one of which reads thus:

Alien abduction stories
were pregnancy stories
in a time of IVF

and assisted reproduction

³ Instagram post by Deborah Czeresko, August 5, 2019.

little green men (why men?)
at work inside women's bodies (why women?)

Scully bled from her nose
after she got abducted by aliens.

I was terrified, as a child
the blood dripping down
her lips
was—her menstrual flow?

An abortion?

I had bad dreams.

This wasn't innocent. As a child, I remember X-Files FBI agent Dana Scully lying on a gelid extraterrestrial operation table, white tunic with exposed belly. Side shot: and the belly grew and grew and grew like an inflatable balloon, white lights on her skin and a long and thin metal device pressuring against the bellybutton. This is my first memory of a technology like IVF, but also of the objectification of the female body. Later, Scully went back to the real world ignorant of her condition—until her nose started to bleed. Her body turned against her. It wanted to expel that “alien thing.” Thinking back to it, perhaps best to be “fertilized” by an alien than a man.

The nascent field of queer ecology has mainly focused on a critique of heteronormativity and reprocentricity. Queer ecology speaks about how norms are built on a regulation of sex (and

gender) according to coupled reproduction, the nuclear family, its capitalist apparatus and environmental footprint. It also has a thing for gay animals and sex changes among plants and other beings. Mpreg could well exemplify a, perhaps not so fictional when you look at the animal kingdom, queer biology. Quite the contrary. To my eyes Mpreg actually challenges the notion of heteronormativity used by queer ecologists.

When a male gay couple adopts the heterosexual model, with its economic aspirations, power dynamics, and toxicity, what is the heteronormative?

When gay men assume the roles of abuser and abused, violence onto bed, onto the club's toilet, onto the park at night, what is the heteronormative?

When male gay couples reproduce seemingly by themselves, erasing the ovum and the surrogate, what is the heteronormative?

Side story: my partner was recently caught off guard by an Instagram ad for surrogacy; the picture, accompanied by a catchy beat, showed two self-fulfilled white men in bed holding a white baby high in the air, no mention of the surrogate mother, the uterus, or the economics behind the egg.

What is the heteronormative?

Biologically speaking, is it life conceived from the fusion of sperm and ovum?

And what of its performativity? What to say of a man and a woman, cis or otherwise, rubbing their genitals like two lesbians, pegging as if gay men? Women uncommitted to LGBTQ+ struggles listening to recordings of boy love in a karaoke booth?

Normativity is a systemic disease, instrumental and inegalitarian, and it extends well beyond bodies, engrained in devices and techniques: Scully's operation table. What it erases is not women's experiences strictly, or of intersex people, transmen and non-binary folk, but an

history of violence anchored in the gestational body. And it does so regardless of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

—For Alice dos Reis