Theories and Methodologies

Henri Lefebvre's (Every)Day Care

LILITH TODD

Wait until the endnotes for the Q and A portion of the essay. There, a text can reenact dialogues, ones at least close to what might have originated as thinking out loud, talking over one another, ceding space to another, offstage voice. In Henri Lefebvre's essay in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, the second endnote suggests a moment of such dialogue between Lefebvre, as he rehearses his well-known argument that alienation suffused everyday life, and "young women," in which both he and they think out loud about how reproductive labor might be differently alienating. In the body of the essay, Lefebvre flags the term "alienation" as an example of the dynamic yet imperfect exchange between Marxist thought and culture. He then elaborates in the note. I quote it in full:

> The concept of alienation, in moving from Marxist thinking into culture, has lost much of its integrity and force. For example, young women have come to me to say they do not want any children because children represent self-alienation. I suggest that if you have a child against your will, that constitutes alienation. But it is different if you want the child. Alienation is determined not by the condition of women but by the action of will and desire. ("Toward" 88)

For the young women to "come" to him stages the "example" as an interaction where Lefebvre is still (perhaps at the podium), the young women mobile. That these "young" women (plural!) gave unprompted disclosures about their reproductive choices to a then eighty-two-year-old Lefebvre rings a little false, although it is not impossible. For Lefebvre's contribution, readers today do not have what they have for other, select contributions in the edited volume, transcribed "discussions" that record the post-talk comments and

LILITH TODD is assistant professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. She is at work on a monograph on care work, historical-materialist poetics, and eighteenth-century literature.

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Modern Language Association of America

PMLA 140.3 (2025), doi:10.1632/S003081292510120X

questions, which might have confirmed that this interaction happened or even put a name to this critique.[1] Rather, in the note the "young women" serve at once as interlocutors and as fiction, imaginatively embodied and disembodied. These women at best are instrumentalized, meant to stage an example of imprecise alienation, to show how the term has become a colloquialism, detached from an analysis of the mode of production or detached from Lefebvre's sense of what it means to feel disowned.

But what little access we readers have to these women's comments, real or imagined, troubles more than clarifies the example. From what I can glean, they suggest that under the current "condition of women," wanting as well as having a child represents alienation. In response, Lefebvre simply insists that to "have a child against your will" is the only situation that would count (to both want and have is then, presumably, unalienated). It is a debate about definitions that unfolds indirectly through discussing the experience of having children. As a more general correction meant to give "integrity and force" to a hazy definition, it does so only in the sense that it borrows the "force" of unwanted pregnancy. Viscerally, the loss of bodily autonomy in forced birth ("against your will") captures how radically dispossessing any real experience of alienation is.

This moment is not the first time that Lefebvre turns to women to illustrate his Marxist vocabulary. They, or more accurately their presumed sphere, formed the terrain of his interpretations. The germ for the concept of Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* originated from a domestic scene: his wife walked in holding a box of laundry soap and said, "very seriously," "this is an excellent product" (qtd. in Ross 58). Perhaps because of this inspiration, the force of the everyday bears on women: anchored in the home, "stultified by the specialization and fragmentation of labor," "*women symbolize everyday life in its entirety. They embody its situation, its conflicts and its possibilities. They are its active critique*" (Lefebvre, *Critique* 517). I am not the first to notice Lefebvre's choice of examples. Feminist critics have pointed to the crutch of binaries in Lefebvre's thinking, in which the masculine / feminine binary maps on to the new dialectical oppositions he wishes to articulate, such as modern / everyday, innovation / repetition, linear / repetitive, or organized / disorganized.[2] Women shopping, women holding boxes of soap, women at home working around the clock to tend to bodily needs of children and husband, even—in a more essentialist vein—women in tune with biological clocks capture everyday life as at once suffused with capitalist relations and already containing some of the innate resistances to its rhythms and demands.

As in the endnote, women's experiences of the everyday, if more ambiguously, illustrate his capacious definition of alienation, or, as he puts it, the "many alienations" that "take many forms" (*Critique* 501). Marx's definition of alienation, "the transformation of man's *activities* and relations into *things* by the action of economic *fetishes*, such as money, commodities, and capital" is but one extreme of a more amorphous concept (501), one that is historically specific, relativized, dialectical with "disalienation," and "infinitely complex" (503). "Women" (scare quotes his) prove equally complicated and stand for "a heightened image of the general alienation of our own specific society" (505). Figuring out what complicates both "women" and alienation boils down to an almost exasperated articulation of the question, "What do women want?" Each example, "love, or motherhood, or housework," proves troubled because "representation and symbolism . . . intervene in the motivation of individual desires as much as or more than in the material conditions of activity (although the one does not exclude the other)" (505). This passage acknowledges the limits of the binary between wanting and not wanting that he relies on in the endnote, and here "individual desires" instead interweave with representations. The difficulty of understanding whether someone wants to cook dinner (after being home or in a factory all day) exemplifies the limits of a narrow Marxist vocabulary.

If this exchange between young women and Lefebvre did not occur at the conference, I wish it had. I see in the women's comments an effort to reverse the direction of the metaphor: they seem to ask for Lefebvre not to use the condition of women to reveal his ideas but to have his ideas reveal the conditions of women. These anonymous young women apply Lefebvre's definition of alienation to

their concept of "having a child." It is a move that I would like to replicate here. In doing so, I find a strand of Lefebvre's inheritors who read the body as the routine site of alienation, but I also find that this kind of routine alienation could reveal more about living in a body in relationship with others, which reproduction and its attendant care labors require.[3] What Lefebvre accidentally opens up is an integrated vision of exercising bodily autonomy, not as an individual, but entangled with one's own and others' repeated, everyday labors—that is, the details that make up everyday life.

In the first volume of *Critique of Everyday Life*, published in 1947, he characterized alienation as a diffuse sense of one's entanglement with an alien construction. His descriptions evoke two opposed, separate beings—"'me', a man" and "'him', the artificial being"—that through these constant, everyday moments are sutured together (187). Subtle details, the movement of the body ("certain gestures"), the smaller units of language ("certain words"), or acts ("certain actions"), "seem to come from an 'alien being'" (187).[4] While what he calls "genuine criticism" will "expose an *unreality*" around the alienated man, the ultimate goal is not to disentangle these two beings, either in criticism or in going about life (188, 189). Alienation plays out as a dialectical drama in which "he is inseparable from this 'other' self, his creation, his mirror, his statue—more: his body" (189).

Momentary awareness of a double self echoes certain descriptions of pregnancy as a series of sudden, fleeting realizations of an alien being inseparable from a "me." Iris Young theorizes pregnancy as an "alienating" bodily experience in which the subject is "spilt or doubled" (46). As with Lefebvre's alienation, this awareness comes from subtle, specific bodily encounters: "She experiences her body as herself and not herself. Its inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other" (46). More intriguingly, as for Lefebvre, the awareness of these sutures is more acute from an encounter with the body reframed as and by a social product, namely for Young "the institutions and practices of medicine" (46). This sense has recently percolated into popular depictions of pregnancy and has found analogues in the many ways that people change and reshape their bodies. In her best-selling lyric double narrative of her pregnancy and her partner Harry's top surgery and hormone replacement therapy, Maggie Nelson summarizes pregnancy (elusively connected to Harry's experience) as "radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one's body" (13).[5] That feeling extends beyond nine months: "My breasts were sore for over a year, and while they don't hurt anymore, they still feel like they belong to someone else (and in a sense, since I'm still nursing they do)" (86). And, yet, how to reconcile this double self with a solid concept of bodily autonomy is not immediately apparent to Nelson, who affixes the relationship with an "and," suggesting the slogan, "IT'S A CHOICE *AND* A CHILD" (94). Carmen Winant's *My Birth* (a title that purposely obscures "who claims the birth," perhaps parent, child, even "the doctors and nurses who attended them" [66, 70]) names a similar ambiguity: "I am no closer to understanding who takes possession of this process" (113). An entangled vision of bodily autonomy suggests all three, that to be mine, the birth must be constructed by others and our social relations (mother-child, patient-doctor, client-hospital).

To return to the endnote: What exactly do those women mean by "self-alienation"? I can't know from Lefebvre's account alone. They may have been referring to what Young suggests, that pregnancy itself enacts a split experienced in the body, which they wished to refuse altogether. I also cannot know what they meant when they said they "do not want any children" and what labors they imagined implicit in that phrase. When Winant labels "my birth" a process, it echoes one definition of social reproduction, as "the processes that enable the worker to arrive at the doors of her place of work every day," in Tithi Bhattacharya's words (1). Certainly, Lefebvre also thought about social reproduction, offering a similar critique of Marx, pointing out that "workers do not have a life in the workplace, they have a social life, family life, political life" ("Toward" 78).

One reading of what these women meant by self-alienation is that, as Catharine A. MacKinnon put it in her contribution, "sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism" (106). Indeed, Christine Delphy

had come to see that "marriage was a labor contract" (Barrett and McIntosh, "Christine Delphy" 96). In Delphy's essay in the 1988 volume, she posits abortion as just such a threat to the husband-boss's control: "since the bringing up of children is labor extorted from women, it could in fact be thought that men fear women will seek to escape from the labor of child-rearing, notably by limiting births" (263).[6] What is missing in this discussion, as Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh argue, is why "the bringing up of children is labor extorted from women" ("Christine Delphy" 102). Their question sparks projects like those that Barrett and McIntosh undertook to see how the division of labor has been historically gendered or to imagine how care labor might be redistributed.[7] This intervention also broke up the unit of mother-wife-woman, who enters unequally into marriage, gives birth, and does childcare for her own child. These "other labors" are extorted from women in the plural (Barrett and McIntosh, "Christine Delphy" 102). In thinking of "having a child" in more plural ways, what might it mean then to want or not want that experience?

In turning away from sexuality back to work, from pregnancy to the distributed labors of childcare, the body still gives force to alienation. Lefebvre's approach is another kind of materialist analysis of this division; while not necessarily illuminating the economic and ideological relations of capitalism (as many undertaking social reproduction theory do), it "is *material* because it reasserts and cultivates the body" (Lefebvre, "Toward" 82). Lefebvre is talking about the body made inseparable from the urban environment, its natural rhythms shaped and reshaped by the city, its work routines, and its machines. Many have taken urban space (or space more generally) to be the literal grounds of struggle over the disalienation of everyday life for Lefebvre and his scions; it can be transformed to transform life. With this emphasis, his heirs have always seemed apparent: Michel de Certeau, who gave the city dweller more agency while walking the city or the reader more agency while consuming, and Georges Perec, who befriended Lefebvre and undertook writing experiments about urban life. Yet, those other labors shape and reshape the body too; as Alan Sears observes, "practices of caregiving labor, whether paid or unpaid . . . develop a different sense of one's body than working in a mine or in a heavy industry" (185). This understanding plays out in aesthetic experiments as well. For example, in 1988 the feminist performance artist Linda Montano proposed reworking everyday life by "announc[ing] to friends . . . you will take care of them when they need someone . . . [to] go on errands" (*Art/Life Institute Handbook* 18).[8] Thinking still with the body shaped by space, Lefebvre looks for, reads for, and "notices" the "often modest and even pathetic" breaks, represented by "ordinary willingness to find pleasure in beaches and in the expanses of water themselves" ("Toward" 82). To ask again that his vision of alienation illuminate the conditions of women: What are the modest and pathetic breaks that restructure the everyday of caregiving's labor?

To view alienation as a synonym for lost bodily control now has a legacy, so to speak. In her book *Profit and Pleasure* (2000), Rosemary Hennessy defined alienation in such visceral, embodied terms. For her, commodity production requires alienation specifically "from sensation and affect" (217). The worker "sever[s] her human potential to labor from her needs" to "present herself as 'owner' of her labour power" (217).[9] These thinkers have also found those breaks in seeking out physical and aesthetic pleasure, grounded in the body. In 1983, the same year as the conference, Fredric Jameson published his essay on pleasure (following Roland Barthes, for him, pleasure is textual as well as sensual) that promised both more and less for the body. To be warm, fed, at ease is "not as Utopian vision of another way of living" and can only "[solve] my individual relationship with my own body" (*Formations* 10–11). Utopia is rather channeled allegorically through embodied experience. While not evoking Lefebvre, Jameson contrasts this pleasure ("the potentialities of the material body") with a thick description of consumption that seems taken out of *Critique of Everyday Life* (14). Writing at the intersection of these thinkers and proposing her own Trans-Feminist Marxism, Kay Gabriel has posited that "the point of this politics is to attend to the body as a site of struggle over the intensive disalienation of mental and manual labor."

As the body bears the brunt of alienation in "everyday life," in "being hungry, or tired, in chronic pain or constant grief, routinely fearful or simply bored"—these experiences that "one class inflicts on the other"—the body is then "mediator" of social relations. Disalienation, in contrast, reclaims the body and its activities for individual desires through the means available. For her, the struggle in practical terms is channeled through the "transsexual demands to exercise autonomy, however enabled by social or medical interventions, over our configurations of embodiment and sexuality."

Making the body the locus then changes what is being defined. While one might easily feel the force of a body not one's own to make sense of alienation, what in turn is bodily autonomy? ("Can you define that for me?" would be my question in an imaginary Q and A with Lefebvre and his inheritors.) More practically, the term has picked up new valences: it can signal not utopias but individual isolations, fantasies of bodily purity, especially white women's, that cordon the body off from the world, such as when antivaccine movements appropriate slogans like "my body, my choice" (Stümer). It is similarly difficult to disentangle autonomy from choice (or Jameson's word, "consent" [*Formations* 10]), both of which posit an individual actor and perhaps a blank background on which they act. Wanting a child has always "depend[ed] on the support of sisters, friends, and strangers," as Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger put it in their critique of the rhetoric of choice, or, one might add, the support of doctors, nurses, and hospital receptionists (11). Lastly, even zooming out slightly to those networks, the risk of this framework is to constrain the focus to the particular and the temporary, making all other demands mere metaphoric possibility (see Srnicek and Williams).

Asking again for Lefebvre's definition of alienation to illuminate the complexities of social reproduction reveals how bodily autonomy, like the everyday and like alienation that it resists, "is entirely mediated and mass-mediated" (Lefebvre, "Toward" 79). Capitalism has extended the mode of production into the everyday and into bodily autonomy; that is true for childcare but also for the larger infrastructure of medical care that, for example, supports wanting and not wanting to have a child (Winant suggests her doctor might "possess" the birth process).[10] But this mediation only makes everyday life riper for reformulation by an "art of living," by interventions in aesthetics and culture. As Lefebvre writes, "the genuine art of living implies a human reality, both individual and social" (*Critique* 219). The project is not to collapse the two individuals, mother and baby (or mother and nanny), but to collapse the individual body and its dependencies. Another one of his definitions of alienation is the contrast between two views of life: in one, life is "some immense anthill, swarming with obscure, blind, anonymous beings and actions" and in "another we see it shining with splendour and glamour which certain individuals and certain actions confer on it" (219, 219–20). To exert bodily autonomy then would be to bring these perspectives together—the body's private assertions alongside the anonymous beings and actions that "produced" such moments of individual splendor—against the forces of alienation that keep them apart (220).

When Gabriel asserts "transsexual demands to exercise autonomy, however enabled by social or medical interventions," as an "affirmation over and against routine abjection," the "however" may seem like a caveat or a compromise, but I do not read it that way: it exists more as an acknowledgment. An entangled bodily autonomy enables this subordinate clause, a nod to the social and medical interventions—the relationships with other people—that underpin affirmations against abjection. While it is not impossible for such interventions to be taken on individually, more often they involve other workers.

In *The Last Safe Abortion*, Winant writes, "abortion care is work. Which is to say that it is and looks entirely regular." To prove this, she assembles everyday scenes and details of abortion clinics and offices: messy desks, blue gloved hands on crinkly white paper, people on phones. Across two pages, she places eight photos of a woman, headset on, on a call, at a computer, writing something down on a piece of paper: the framing of the collection suggests that she works in an abortion clinic. In each still frame, her head moves slightly, tilted down, up to the computer, she is serious and laughing or faced away, until she turns to look at the camera and she looks more

blankly, ambiguously, certainly not comforting. What administrative labor she undertakes is invisible, blurred by the computer screen's glare. Her certain gestures constitute the work of someone else's bodily autonomy.

Embedded within Lefebvre's endnote is one legacy of his capacious understanding of everyday alienation as it applied to "young women's" lives, to pregnancy, to social reproduction, to embodiment, to care work, to medical work, to abortion work. Locating what I have argued is such a fruitful exchange in the endnote might imply a marginality, an implicit suppression below the surface of the text. Yet another interpretation of notes is that, as Jameson once mused, they are a "living thought" (*Marxism and Form* 9n2). The legacy, the still living part of this essay, I suggest, is in asking again how social reproduction complicates the transformation of activities into things, since its activities intimately transform multiple, intimately related bodies, not always necessarily into things, but certainly transforms them repeatedly with some potential breaks.

Notes

1. For example, in the "discussion" following Fredric Jameson's essay the first question is attributed (parenthetically) to the Marxist-feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser.

2. Felski is the most persuasive and most explicit on this subject. See also Ross; Berlant; and, for a summary of specifically intersectional feminist concerns, Reid-Musson.

3. In summarizing Lefebvre's efforts to "reinstate the body," Simonsen has asked for a "juxtaposition" between Lefebvre's approach to the body and feminist literature (1, 10).

4. He means this rather literally: "The philosopher has no right to elaborate this notion [alienation] in itself . . . above all he must confront the notion with concrete situations in everyday life" (104).

5. For Nelson's commitment to relationality as a textual and material practice, see Collins.

6. She does note that her account, which so specifically links controlling fertility to marital violence, is "too abridged to be called full explanations" (263).

7. See Barrett; Barrett and McIntosh, *Anti-social Family*. Social reproduction theory similarly has taken up this issue, which sometimes orients itself from Lise Vogel's 1983 monograph, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*.

8. Montano describes another one of her performance pieces, "Odd Jobs" (1973), as "physically demanding," yet "I was in a state of wakefulness which I associated with the art making process" (*Art*). One can imagine that care would result in the same back-and-forth between physical exhaustion and awareness.

9. Hennessy also summarizes "need," which is a key term for Lefebvre, but one he defines as ambiguously related to socially mediated desires. She writes, "Needs are corporeal—because they involve keeping the body alive—but they are not 'natural,' because meeting these corporeal needs always takes place through social relationships" (210).

10. Donna Haraway has well covered the body itself as capital. The second edition of *Modest_Witness* opens with a dialogue similar to the one I've been describing, an interview prefaced by key terms, including "Ontologically entangled authorship," to be defined in conversation and offered up as a "map-poem" (xv).

Works Cited

Barrett, Michèle. *Women's Oppression Today*. 3rd ed., Verso, 2014.

Barrett, Michèle, and Mary McIntosh. *The Anti-social Family*. Verso, 1991.

———. "Christine Delphy: Toward a Materialist Feminism." *Feminism Review*, no. 1, 1979, pp. 95–106.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.

Bhattacharya, Tithi. "Mapping Social Reproduction Theory." Introduction. *Social Reproduction Theory*, edited by Bhattacharya, Pluto Press, 2018, pp. 1–20.

Collins, Katie. "The Morbidity of Maternity: Radical Receptivity in Nelson's *The Argonauts*." *Criticism*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2019, pp. 311–34.

Delphy, Christine. "Patriarchy, Domestic Mode of Production, Gender, and Class." Nelson and Grossberg, pp. 259–70.

Felski, Rita. *Doing Time*. New York UP, 2000.

Gabriel, Kay. "Gender as Accumulation Strategy." *Invert Journal*, www.are.na/block/7106265.

Haraway, Donna. *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2018.

Hennessy, Rosemary. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. Routledge, 2000.

Jameson, Fredric. *Formations of Pleasure*. Routledge, 1983.

———. *Marxism and Form*. Princeton UP, 1972.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life*. Translated by John Moore and Gregory Elliott, Verso, 2014.

———. "Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics: Remarks Occasioned by the Centenary of Marx's Death." Translated by David Reifman. Nelson and Grossberg, pp. 75–88.

MacKinnon, Catharine A. "Desire and Power: A Feminist Perspective." Nelson and Grossberg, pp. 105–22.

Montano, Linda. *Art in Everyday Life*. Open Studio, 1981.

———. *Art/Life Institute Handbook*. Women's Studio Workshop, 1988.

Nelson, Cary, and Lawrence Grossberg, editors. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. U of Illinois P, 1988.

Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Graywolf, 2015.

Reid-Musson, Emily. "Intersectional Rhythmanalysis: Power, Rhythm, and Everyday Life." *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 42, no. 6, 2018, pp. 881–97.

Ross, Kristin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*. MIT Press, 1995.

Ross, Loretta J., and Rickie Solinger. *Reproductive Justice*. U of California P, 2017.

Sears, Alan. "Body Politics." *Social Reproduction Theory*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya, Pluto Press, 2018, pp. 171–91.

Simonsen, Kirsten. "Bodies, Sensations, Space and Time: The Contribution from Henri Lefebvre." *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2005, pp. 1–14.

Srnicek, Nick, and Alex Williams. *Inventing the Future*. Rev. ed., Verso, 2016.

Stümer, Jenny. "Her Body, Her Choice." *Camera Obscura*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2023, pp. 165–95.

Vogel, Lise. *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*. Rutgers UP, 1983.

Winant, Carmen. *The Last Safe Abortion*. SPBH Editions, 2024.

———. *My Birth*. SPBH Editions, 2024.

Young, Iris. "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation." *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1984, pp. 45–62.