Julia Wurr

Science and Biocapitalist Reproduction: Commercial Surrogacy in Joanne Ramos' *The Farm*

ABSTRACT By reimagining existing so-called surrogacy farms as a luxury surrogacy facility in the United States, Joanne Ramos' novel *The Farm* extrapolates both from social realities in the realm of commercial surrogacy and from recent developments in the field of assisted reproductive technology (ART). In doing so, *The Farm* negotiates the use of reproductive science and technology as biocapitalist instruments of extractivism, and it envisions commercial surrogacy as a form of privatized colonialism which operates according to racist, classist, and heterosexist principles. The novel thus visualizes how the increasing privatization of ART further exacerbates reproductive inequalities, and it demonstrates how the biocapitalist reproduction of the few occurs at the cost of the many. At the same time, the novel's own formal alignment with the premises of biocapitalism as well as the text's significant historical and gender gaps undermine its attempt to criticize the substantial inequalities which result from biocapitalist developments in the field of reproduction.

KEYWORDS biocapitalism, capitalist realism, commercial surrogacy, *The Farm,* science and technology

Published in 2019, Filipina-American writer Joanne Ramos' debut novel *The Farm* reimagines existing so-called surrogacy farms as a luxury surrogacy facility in the United States. This facility offers those who are privileged not only a remedy for fertility problems but also promises streamlined processes of gestation as well as the production of optimized offspring. By extrapolating both from social realities in the realm of commercial surrogacy and from recent developments in the field of assisted reproductive technology (ART), the novel negotiates the use of reproductive science and technology as biocapitalist instruments of extractivism and envisions

Wurr, Julia. 2025. "Science and Biocapitalist Reproduction: Commercial Surrogacy in Joanne Ramos' *The Farm*." In *Science, Culture, and Postcolonial Narratives*, edited by Anton Kirchhofer and Karsten Levihn-Kutzler, 285–305. Anglophone Postcolonial Studies 2. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.1126.c23369

commercial surrogacy as a form of privatized colonialism which operates according to racist, classist, and heterosexist principles. *The Farm* thus visualizes how the increasing privatization of ART further exacerbates reproductive inequalities and demonstrates how the biocapitalist reproduction of the few occurs at the cost of the many. At the same time, and as this article will show, the text's own formal properties undermine its critical gesture.

While there is hardly any scholarly literature on *The Farm* as of yet, the novel has attracted wide public attention. It has been chosen by many book clubs, not least the *BBC Radio 2 Book Club*, and has received numerous reviews, for instance in *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Although the novel's speculative gesture limits itself to assembling a number of existing elements—such as surrogacy centres and technologies of reproduction, surveillance, and self-optimization—into a luxury surrogacy facility situated in the United States, *The Farm* has repeatedly been reviewed as one of the many recent "fertility dystopia[s]" (Evans 2019; cf. Heing 2019; Phelan 2019), or interpreted as a work of speculative fiction (cf. Gebauer 2020). Since—albeit much less luxurious—so-called 'surrogacy hostels' were a common practice in India up until the official ban of commercial surrogacy in 2021 (Pande 2010, 970; cf. Cherry 2014, 265), this recurrent reading of the novel as a dystopia indicates that, despite portraying surrogacy as a privatized form of colonialism, the text invites Western-centric interpretations.

More generally, these Western-centric interpretations result from a double standard which is often at work in readings of Western dystopias: here, the dystopian element largely relies on a geographical relocation, which means that a story with a Global Northern setting evokes conditions similar to those already existent in the Global South (cf. Wurr 2024, 2). In this regard, readings of *The Farm* as speculative or dystopian fiction are no exception; yet they reveal that in many fictionalizations of infertility, "[a]t stake is not really the question of human reproductive capacity but of reproductive futurity: whose fertility and family structures will be preserved? Who will inherit the Earth?" (Vint 2021, 79). More specifically, however, this article suggests that such biased readings of *The Farm* stem from the blind spots in the novel's own negotiation of biocapitalist reproduction, that is, from the text's neglect of not only biocapitalism's historical origins but also of its contemporary aesthetic and ideological configurations.

This article thus argues that the novel's attempt to criticize the substantial inequalities resulting from commodifiable developments in the field of reproduction ultimately remains futile. On the one hand, the text employs an intersectional critique narrativized by means of variable focalization

and juxtaposition as well as a speculative gesture to extrapolate how an increasingly biocapitalist use of science further exacerbates reproductive exploitation. On the other hand, however, the text adopts a capitalist realist mode which deflects a systemic critique. According to Mark Fisher, capitalist realism can be understood as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2009, 2, emphasis in original). While capitalist realism thus refers to a market-based sociotechnical imaginary which allows no alternative thinking (cf. Jasanoff 2015, 4; Fisher 2009, 2; Vint 2021, 7–8),[1] this article conceptualizes the capitalist realist mode as a specific form of writing which is inextricably linked with reproductive futurism, that is, with the perpetuation of the current social order through heteronormative reproduction (cf. Edelman 2004, 2, 25). Without suggesting that realist writing *per se* is capitalist, this article shows how the specific capitalist realist mode employed in *The Farm* is structurally and stylistically aligned with the premises of biocapitalism, and that it is characterized by a capitalist realist "*precorporation*: [that is,] the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture" (Fisher 2009, 9, emphasis in original). In the novel, this precorporation not only finds expression on the level of form but also manifests itself—both literally and metaphorically—in the desire for optimized children, that is, in the ideas of prenatal enhancement and competitive child-rearing.

In order to discuss the tensions between *The Farm*'s criticism of biocapitalist reproduction and the biocapitalist realist mode which the novel adopts to express this criticism, this article will first provide some contextual information on ART and on universalizing notions of biological life in times of biocapitalist globalization. By means of close reading, the article will then analyse *The Farm*'s negotiation of science and technology as biocapitalist instruments of stratified reproduction, and it will discuss the frames in which the novel negotiates the fragmentation of motherhood. In doing so, the article will pay particular attention to how *The Farm* employs variable focalization and juxtaposition as a means of criticizing the unequal impact which the privatization of ART creates, and to how the text's own biocapitalist overdetermination as well as its writing out of

1 Sheila Jasanoff defines the "sociotechnical imaginary" as "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology" (2015, 4, quoted in Vint 2021, 7).

African-American surrogate mothers undermine its critical gesture. The article closes by reflecting on the implications of the text's biocapitalist sociotechnical imaginary of surrogacy.

ART, Biocapitalism, and Universalizing Notions of "Life Itself"

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, but especially in the last few decades, technoscientific advances in ART such as artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization (IVF), the cryopreservation of gametes or embryos, and genetic screening and diagnosis have engendered massive changes in the reproductive realities of groups that are already considered advantaged (cf. Harding 2011, 14; Sándor 2019, 176; Browner 2016, 818–19). Not only has the increasing use of ART triggered controversial debates about the substantial inequalities regarding both the access to and the distribution of the costs and risks of reproductive innovations, it has also fundamentally changed the expectations towards human reproduction as well as the sociotechnical imaginary of the latter (cf. Sándor 2019, 176). In fact, ART no longer serves as a remedy for people with fertility problems only. To those who have access to it, ART also gives more control over their reproductive choices, for instance, the option of postponing childbirth, of sex selection, and of ensuring enhanced health for their offspring or of healing sick children in the family (cf. Sándor 2019, 174). In this extended use, ART is, firstly, in line with a shift in biomedicine from the practice of healing and preventative health to a government of life "concerned with our growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures" (Rose 2007, 3). Secondly, the extended use of ART also reinforces stratified reproduction, that is, the fact "that physical and social reproduction tasks are accomplished differentially according to inequalities that are based on hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, gender, place in a global economy, and migration status and that are structured by social, economic and political forces" (Colen 1995, 78).

Apart from epitomizing a pronounced shift in biomedicine which reinforces stratified reproduction, ART has also contributed to the further differentiation of reproductive roles. If biomedical innovations such as hormonal contraceptives and artificial insemination had already prepared the fragmentation of motherhood, ART was instrumental in realizing it, so that "[…] today it is possible, for the first time in human history, to distinguish not only between social and biological motherhood but also between various modalities of biological motherhood, such as genetic

motherhood, gestational motherhood, and even, some might argue, mitochondrial motherhood" (Gunnarsson Payne 2019, 13). In commercial surrogacy arrangements, such a fragmentation of reproductive roles as well as the intricate link between reproductive technology, reproductive justice, and social inequality are particularly pressing, especially when they perpetuate colonial patterns of extractivism.

Such a perpetuation of extractivist patterns is, among others, facilitated by the universalizing notion of "life itself" (Lettow 2018, 14)—a notion which also underlies many definitions of biocapitalism. Biocapitalism is a term used to describe the systemic politico-economic, but also cultural and epistemic transformations engendered by the growth of global bio-industries such as the reproductive industry. According to Susanne Lettow, biocapitalism "refers to processes of the primary valorization of materials derived from human bodies and nonhuman living beings, to the meaning of these processes for capitalist accumulation strategies and to related transformations of modes of labour, exploitation and subjectivation" (2018, 13; see also Rajan 2006, 1–36). As biocapitalism thus crucially relies on the primary valorization of "organic or sub-organic materials and processes" through the life sciences, universalizing notions of "life itself" often undergird analyses of the phenomenon (Lettow 2018, 14; see also Pravinchandra 2016). However, materials such as molecules, cells, genomes, and genes or processes such as surrogacy and organ donation "do not exist in unmediated ways but […] are made accessible or generated only through techno-scientific procedures, and thus knowledge production and technological intervention" (Lettow 2018, 14). In order to conceptualize biocapitalism, it is therefore not "life itself" but the specific spatio-temporal situatedness of biocapitalist processes, practices, and relationships within global power differentials which needs to be analysed (cf. Lettow 2018, 14).

The Farm

Set in the US and illustrating that "biomedical science can be colonizing in spaces that are not [officially] recognized as colonial" (Towgi and Vora, quoted in Mendes and Lau 2019, 325), *The Farm* constitutes an insightful case study when it comes to considering how the extractivist use of commercial surrogacy results in a form of biocapitalist colonization which not only upholds and extends imperial structures, but which also creates new reproductive needs and expectations (cf. Lettow 2018, 14). As the following close reading will show, the novel fictionalizes ART as a form of biocapitalist colonialism which offers those who are privileged not only a remedy for

fertility problems but also "the selection of embryos and fetuses imbued with certain traits considered desirable by prospective mothers and parents (e.g., sex, the absence of known genetic anomalies)" (Browner 2016, 818–19). In fact, and as indicated by the facility's evocative official name, at Golden Oaks, everything is geared towards creating babies optimized according to their parents' competitive expectations. The surrogate mothers, who are only paid small monthly instalments before receiving the big final bonus on the condition of delivering a baby considered healthy, are on a diet of superfoods and constantly surveyed by means of weekly ultrasounds and the so-called "WellBand," a tracking device. In addition, they also have regular appointments for attaching "UteroSoundz speakers" to their stomachs, that is, speakers which expose the unborn babies to a programme which consists of classical music, the speeches of powerful men, and poetry in multiple languages and which is meant to enhance the foetus' competitiveness (cf. Ramos 2019, 134). For Mae, the general manager of Golden Oaks, both such mechanist stimuli and the idea that "fetal potential" (Ramos 2019, 108) can be equalled with the foetus' "profit-producing potentiality" (Vint 2021, 137) seem completely logical: "Why not give their firstborn a jumpstart in life in an environment calibrated *explicitly* to maximize his fetal potential?" (Ramos 2019, 108, emphasis in original). As the male possessive pronoun in Mae's thought indicates and as is confirmed throughout the novel (cf. Ramos 2019, 292), the selection of traits, for instance in the form of son preference, is intricately interwoven with the idea of maximizing "fetal potential" (see also Ramos 2019, 71).

This mechanist and instrumentalized conception of biological life in the form of capitalist precorporation determines all interactions at "the Farm." It is reflected by the fact that, at Golden Oaks, everyone is instrumentally referred to by means of their capitalized function, for instance, "Hosts," "Clients," "Coordinator," but also "Baby," and becomes increasingly apparent as the plot progresses: Jane, a Filipina immigrant and the novel's protagonist, has just given birth to Amalia, her first child. Having left her unfaithful husband, Jane now lives in a crammed dormitory with her elderly cousin Ate and numerous other immigrants. When Ate, herself a well-paid and highly recommended baby nurse, is too ill to nurse the newborn son of millionaires whom she normally works for, she asks Jane to fill in for her. During this assignment, Jane encounters many racist and classist micro-aggressions; in addition, she first experiences how enormous amounts of money are spent on optimization. Due to an unfortunate series of events, however, Jane loses this job. Bitterly blaming herself, she meekly agrees when Ate advises her to become a surrogate at Golden Oaks. With a heavy heart, Jane leaves Amalia in her cousin's care, hoping

that with the huge bonus upon delivery, she will be able to build a better life for her daughter. Isolated from Amalia during the pregnancy, Jane at first frantically but unsuccessfully tries to adhere to Golden Oaks' strict rules, even when she witnesses the medical risks shouldered by Anya, a surrogate who undergoes a forced late-term abortion, and by Reagan, who develops a lump near her collarbone. However, when Mae repeatedly cancels Ate and Amalia's visits, Jane increasingly despairs. Driven by the conviction that her daughter's visits are terminated because Amalia is ill, Jane becomes so desperate that she agrees to a plan to escape from Golden Oaks devised by Regan and Lisa. Jane, who has discovered in the meantime that she is carrying the "billion-dollar baby" (Ramos 2019, 84; 151), that is, the baby of a Chinese billionaire who is willing to pay an enormous bonus upon delivery, thus flees from Golden Oaks. When she finally reaches the hospital where she thinks Amalia is treated, Jane has to realize that Ate is the one who is terminally ill. Having violated her contract, Jane loses the bonus for the child she finally delivers. With no qualified education and in a precarious situation again, she first accepts Mae's offer to become the surrogate of Mae's own child and then to work for Mae as her son's nanny.

In narrativizing this plot, *The Farm* strongly relies on variable focalization and juxtaposition, both of which serve to demonstrate that under biocapitalist conditions, biomedical advances—far from serving "life itself"—very much follow a logic of supply and demand in which a "surplus population, [deemed] not worth the costs of its own reproduction, is strictly contemporaneous with the capitalist promise of more abundant life" (Cooper 2008, 61). In its attempt to assemble a multi-perspectival picture of surrogacy which also gives a voice to those who are often written out of the record—that is, the surrogate mothers—*The Farm* presents the differential impact of technoscientific advances in ART through the eyes of four different focalizers. While Mae, a Harvard graduate and the blond daughter of an American mother and a Chinese immigrant, epitomizes self-optimization and consumerism in their most ruthless form, Ate, a Filipina immigrant, turns her rich clients' wish for optimized offspring into money. Leading a precarious lifestyle in the US, Ate sends most of this money to the Philippines to provide for her old age and for her children, especially her son Roy, whom an accident has left dependent on full-time care. Reagan, who comes from a wealthy white family and has a university degree, becomes a surrogate because she thinks she can combine altruistic with financial goals in this way. Suffering from the fact that her mother has dementia and having a strained relationship with her careerist father, Reagan wants to become independent of her father's financial support and earn the financial means to become a photographer while at the same time doing something meaningful by

helping an infertile client. At Golden Oaks, Reagan becomes a so-called "Premium Host;" she "represents the holy trifecta" which Golden Oaks looks for in such surrogate mothers: "she is Caucasian (a winsome mix of Irish and German, Mae discovered during their interview), she is pretty (but not—and Mae knows from experience this is critical—sexy), and she is educated (cum laude from Duke University—smart—but not intimidatingly so)" (Ramos 2019, 42). The novel juxtaposes Reagan's experiences as a surrogate mother with those of Jane, a Filipina immigrant who does not have a degree and lives in precarious conditions. Jane becomes a "regular" surrogate mother (Ramos 2019, 49). She epitomizes the dehumanizing adversities which migrant workers have to face when they are racialized and reduced to their labour-power while at the same time being restricted in their mobility and employment opportunities (cf. Vint 2021, 49).

By means of juxtaposing its different focalizers—three of whom are from ethnic minorities and have a recent experience of migration in the family—the novel fictionalizes the complicated and changing "relationships between the local and the global in postcolonial technoscientific settings" (Seth 2017, 71; see also Anderson 2002, 643) as a form of biocapitalist colonialism in which the "enhanced possibilities for the (human) subject of interest are coproduced with expulsion from this human community for the racialized subject" (Vint 2021, 16). Through the use of juxtapositions, the text moreover raises the question of who should benefit from research advances—an issue which is particularly pressing given that in the US, since the neoliberal reforms in the Reagan Era, private players can own and extract profit from patents developed using public funding (cf. Vint 2021, 74). While *The Farm* thus shows how profitable the scientific advances in ART are, it contrasts them, for instance, with the lack of a dementia cure for Reagan's mother. Furthermore, the novel juxtaposes elaborate contraptions such as the "UteroSoundz" speakers with Ate's makeshift attempt of using a Walkman and headphone to provide her son Roy with music therapy (cf. Ramos 2019, 158–59).

In order to narrativize different biomedical technologies pertinent to gestational surrogacy, *The Farm* frequently intersperses the main plot with scientific details and thereby presents technoscience as permeating all aspects of life—not just those of the surrogate mothers, but of all those who self-optimize, too. In particular, the novel interweaves hormonal treatment, cryopreservation, foetal implantation, ultrasound, the fictional "UteroSoundz" contraption, but also cancer biopsies into the storyline centred on Madame Deng, the Chinese billionaire whose baby Jane carries. First introduced through Mae's perspective, Deng is presented as a client who does not limit herself to using the services of Golden Oaks. Instead,

Deng makes enormous investments in the reproductive sector. These investments guarantee her preferential treatment and access to services which, as the mention of the "Deng Center for Reproductive Health Studies at MIT" (Ramos 2019, 40) indicates, heavily depend not only on private investors' money but also on these laypersons' personal as well as scientific interests. Reactivating tropes of the 'Yellow Peril' and more recent US-American fears of China's geopolitical and economic ascent (cf. Wing-Fai 2014), the novel gradually reveals that Madame Deng has eight of her frozen embryos—all stored at the Deng Center for Reproductive Health Studies at MIT—simultaneously implanted into eight different surrogates at Golden Oaks. By presenting the disastrous results of the implantations of Deng's eight embryos, the text highlights the immensely unequal distribution of both risks and costs caused by one individual's wish to procreate:

> [Mae] reminds [Leon, Golden Oaks' chief executive] that Deng's eight viable fetuses were implanted in eight separate Hosts: 70, 72, 74, 76, 78, 80, 82, 84, with a less-viable/high-beta fetus implanted in 96. Three (70, 72, 76) spontaneously aborted within the first three weeks of implantation. Hosts 74 and 78 miscarried in weeks four and five, respectively. 80's was terminated due to trisomy. Although the success rate thus far has been disappointing, Mae believes it's served the purpose of demonstrating to Deng the exceedingly steep challenges Golden Oaks faces in attempting to bring her fetuses to term, given the advanced age of Deng's eggs and her husband's sperm at the time of fertilization. […] [B]ecause 82 is a Premium Host, and because the fetus she carries is the male one, the revenue outcome would still be very attractive for Golden Oaks. (Ramos 2019, 292)

Mae's detached cost–benefit analysis of the situation—which stands in stark contrast to the unsettling experiences which the surrogate mothers undergo—demonstrates how medical risks are priced into the commodification of surrogacy. With its "chaste clinical discourse that reduces the womb to little more than an incubator" (Bahri 2019, 315), Mae's report to Leon illustrates the dehumanizing dangers of commodifying procreation. Firstly, it shows how the surrogate mothers are treated as numbers only (in one of the novel's many intertextual nods, Jane features as "Host 84"). Secondly, Mae's diction, which blends business speak with medical vocabulary and incorporates phrases such as "less-viable/high-beta fetus," also highlights the great extent to which Golden Oaks' biocapitalist promise of optimized offspring relies on neoeugenic ideals of what counts as desirable or disposable life.

By means of scenes such as the previous and for the greatest part of the plot, the novel casts Mae as an unsympathetic character who serves as a

mouthpiece for a biocapitalist thinking. The text also employs this strategy of indirect criticism in a conversation which Mae has with Dr Wilde shortly after the 16-week-old foetus Anya carries is diagnosed with mosaic trisomy 21. After Wilde, a medical doctor whose ethics and reliability the text undermines by indirectly characterizing her as a vain and consumerist agent of biocapitalism instead of as a healer (cf. Ramos 2019, 112), explains that "[s]ome children with mosaic Down's have very mild features; but others have almost all the features of full trisomy," Mae immediately reframes this medical issue as a legal and financial question: "She asks Fiona, her contact in Legal, to check whether the contract associated with 80 contains a fee clawback in the case of a defective child, and how exactly 'defective' is defined" (Ramos 2019, 113–14). Following Mae's calculative assessment of the situation, both the elimination of the foetus and Anya's suffering after the forced abortion further underline that Golden Oaks' use of science does not serve to improve the lives of those living with or without disease, but to suppress any future deviations from an increasingly narrow norm. By means of this drastic example, the novel thus visualizes that at Golden Oaks, ART is used according to the logic of a neoliberal eugenics which discards some bodies as disposable. Instead of as a means of fulfilling an unconditional desire to have children, ART is consequently represented as a biocapitalist instrument of implementing homogenizing ideas of genetically related and non-'defective' children (Ramos 2019, 114).

Further criticizing the differential and competitive logics of neoeugenic and biocapitalist uses of ART, the novel negotiates how cryopreservation, that is, the storage of frozen embryos, can serve as a competitive advantage in reproduction and biocapitalist precorporation. *The Farm* evokes cryopreservation in the storyline centring on Madame Deng. What Deng's storage of the dozen frozen embryos illustrates is that, for those with financial means, cryopreservation serves as a measure of extending life cycles through prolonged and postponed reproduction (cf. Vint 2021, 44). Although the scientific reason for this 'banking' of embryos (instead of oocytes) is that the former withstand cryopreservation much better (cf. Twine 2015, 7), the fictionalized mention of the billionaire's cryopreserved embryos evokes parallels between the 'banking' of human and of other forms of capital. While in a different text, this freezing of embryos into storable capital could be read as a more general metaphor of emotional coldness in biocapitalist uses of ART, in *The Farm*, it is critically evoked in its extreme use by a foreign investor only. Because of its limited application, this evocation of frozen and banked biocapital loses some of its critical potential. Nonetheless, it still visualizes one specific form of biocapital and points to another: because of advances in regenerative

medicine which rely on pluripotent stem cells, surplus embryos—from whom these stem cells can be harvested—have become a further resource for extending the lives of the affluent (cf. Vint 2021, 79).

Fragmented Motherhood and the Epigenetic Paradox

As discussed so far, *The Farm* tries to present a picture of commercial surrogacy which is critical of the biocapitalist stratification of reproduction and which rejects universalizing notions of "life itself." However, as the following section will show, this criticism remains limited to individual biocapitalist uses of ART but challenges neither the systemic assumptions nor the aesthetic dimensions which precorporate it. So, notwithstanding that the novel criticizes the highly stratified privatization of technoscientific advances as a means of biocapitalist exploitation, the text hardly questions these techniques, their origins, or a mainly mechanistic and competitive understanding of biological life. For instance, while the novel negotiates paradoxical assumptions about epigenetics at the level of content, the text only juxtaposes these assumptions with idealized bionormative frames of motherhood; in contrast, it leaves the competitive and exploitative logic underlying the epigenetic paradox which it presents mostly unquestioned. At the diegetic level, this epigenetic paradox stems from the striking discrepancy between, on the one hand, Golden Oaks' emphasis on epigenetic factors such as stress and nutrients and, on the other, the unquestioned appropriation of techniques which rely on alienated clinical labour and which evoke actual or metaphorical coldness. Even if Golden Oaks acknowledges the gestational mother's epigenetic influence on the child, which occurs due to her circulation or via placental transfer of nutrients (cf. Gunnarsson Payne 2019, 27), it does not consider as relevant any factors which are not quantified or quantifiable in biochemical terms.

Such an ambivalence with regard to epigenetic influences on the unborn is in line with Deepika Bahri's observations about the downplaying of the gestational mothers' influence on the foetus often found in commercial surrogacy (cf. Bahri 2019, 312). This process of writing out the surrogate mother is achieved both by deemphasizing the affective ties between her and the baby and by emphasizing that there is no genetic link between them. As Bahri argues, such a deemphasis of the surrogate mother's contribution is not only in line with "a partial, self-serving understanding of biology on a disturbing continuum with nineteenth-century racist science founded in genetic determinism" (312) but also tries to ignore that

> [c]hildren born through gestational surrogacy, nourished by the blood and body of their host bodies, are obviously comprised of more than genetic material. In a profoundly meaningful sense, the majority of the cells in the bodies of the babies are made in a real womb, hybridized by the surrogate mother's blood, fluids, and diet. Indeed, restrictions against drinking and smoking during pregnancy are founded in the relevance of epigenetic factors in ensuring the healthy development of the fetus. (Bahri 2019, 312)

In *The Farm*, this partial and ambivalent understanding of epigenetics is—paradoxically—also partially and ambivalently criticized. As the following section will explore, this partial and ambivalent criticism results from a) the fact that, while the text presents the exploitation of surrogate mothers in a critical light, it still subscribes to the same capitalist ideals of exceptionalism as the forms of biocapitalist reproduction and precorporation it describes; and b) the fact that it features considerable gaps as to the origins of biocapitalism. What the novel presents in a critical light is the fact that, although gestational mothers at Golden Oaks are not regarded as simple vessels for carrying a baby (cf. Gunnarsson Payne 2019, 26), they are still treated as vital machines to be biochemically optimized during their pregnancy in order to produce optimized offspring. In this, Golden Oaks completely subscribes to biochemical epigenetic factors and follows research which shows that the gestational mother's stress levels and diet have an influence on the baby. Besides stipulating a rigid diet, regular exercise, and the use of optimizing apparatuses, Golden Oaks also relies on an intricate system of surveillance, the "Panopticon" (Ramos 2019, 11),[2] through which it monitors the surrogate mothers' every move and heartbeat. In contrast, the alienated relationship between the gestational mother and the unborn child or the mother's social isolation are only deemed worthy of consideration if they cause measurable stress levels. When Mae interviews Jane, the general manager therefore warns the potential surrogate mother: "Jane, there is one thing we *do* worry about with Hosts who have their own children: stress. Countless studies show that babies in utero who are exposed to excessive cortisol—which is a chemical released by the body when stressed—end up more prone to anxiety later in life" (Ramos 2019, 58, emphasis in original).

The Farm consequently illustrates how Golden Oaks' business model is based on a mechanistic understanding of life which allows the facility to profit from quantifiable epigenetic factors as well as from racialized, classed, and gendered so-called "Premium" characteristics in line with

2 Next to the entrepreneurial self as *the* model of self-formation in *The Farm*, the "Panopticon" serves as another reference to Foucault (cf. 1975) in the novel.

the clients' demands. Moreover, the text shows how any wider or affective influence which the gestational mother might have on the unborn child is downplayed at the surrogacy facility. Although Golden Oaks undertakes "monumental efforts […] to make Clients feel good about outsourcing their pregnancies" (Ramos 2019, 81), doing so does not only rely on disguising but, in fact, emphasizes the alienation which underlies the commodified clinical labour of surrogacy. The text underlines this by means of a scene in which Reagan is completely ignored during her ultrasound, while the commissioning mother, who participates online, is continually addressed. Told from Reagan's perspective and thus inviting empathy for her, a privileged white "Premium Host," this scene contrasts the alienated surrogate mother's desperate wish to be included in new forms of kinship relations and family formation with how technologies of foetal imaging have changed common understandings of pregnancy and motherhood. As it foregrounds how Reagan—despite her obvious interest in the process—is disregarded both during the ultrasound and in the discussion of further procedures, this passage can be read as a criticism of how technologies of foetal imaging "displace the woman as the patient of care and substitute the fetus, encouraging an imaginary of the fetus as an independent entity rather than as dependent on the woman's body" (Vint 2021, 77–78). As Wilde and her client's complete disregard for Reagan indicates, this displacement of the woman as the patient of care seems to hold particularly true for surrogate mothers, who—due to the further fragmentation of reproductive roles in surrogacy—are reduced to functioning as one component in the gestational process only (cf. Vint 2021, 78; Wurr 2024, 7).

If the novel thus includes passages in which the surrogate mothers' focalization presents their reduction to vital machines in a critical light, the text furthers its criticism of the exploitation of surrogates by displaying Mae's ruthless ruminations. Through free indirect thought representation, it thus becomes clear that for Mae, a logic of assembling and rearing babies which builds on the writing out of the surrogates while at the same time trying to contribute seemingly perfect epigenetic conditions is not at all contradictory or questionable, but desirable. When Mae daydreams about turning Golden Oaks into "a high-end, one-stop shop" for the reproduction of the affluent (Ramos 2019, 107), she thinks of including "an egg and sperm bank," "embryo storage" and "postdelivery services, like on-demand antibiotic and allergen-free breast milk or, even, wet-nursing?" (Ramos 2019, 107–8). As Mae's slightly hesitant plan of offering "even" wet-nursing as a service suggests, she anticipates that—not least due its intricate connection to the history of slavery in the US—this practice still constitutes a taboo (in fact, Jane loses her previous job as a baby nurse because she cannot

prevent the client's baby from suckling at her own breast). Embedded in the accumulative sales-pitch rhetoric which structures Mae's daydreaming, this mention of wet-nursing can be read as the novel's only reference to the long historical entanglement of slavery and surrogacy in the US (cf. Wurr 2024, 6). Between the seventeenth and the second half of the nineteenth century, enslaved women were not only exploited as wet nurses but were also treated as commercial surrogates, who

> were expected and forced through rape to reproduce more children who could be sold as commodities or used as slave labor. These slave mothers had no legal or maternal rights to the children they bore. Their children were commodities in a system of racialized slavery that structured the reproductive lives of millions of women and was a form of forced surrogacy. (Twine 2015, 17)

So even though *The Farm* highlights how, in a globalized world, it is mostly migrant women who perform alienated clinical labour, the text neglects to consider the continuations between the constitutive role of forced surrogacy in chattel slavery and contemporary biocapitalist and racial capitalist practices of surrogacy (cf. Weinbaum 2019, 29–60). This omission is particularly noticeable in the visible absence of African-American surrogate mothers in *The Farm*. If, at the diegetic level, the near absence of African-American surrogate mothers (cf. Ramos 2019, 172, 61, 49, 115) can be explained by Golden Oaks' racialized logic of supply and demand, the novel as a whole replicates the writing out of this particular group by foregoing addressing their historical importance as forced surrogate mothers in chattel slavery's system of commodified reproduction. If one possible interpretation of *The Farm*'s title might be to read it as an allusion to chattel slavery's plantations and its dehumanizing practice of classing enslaved people as chattel and livestock, this allusion remains rather vague, given that the title can be interpreted in numerous other ways.[3]

Although *The Farm* thus omits negotiating the historical origins of commodified reproduction in the US, the novel does explicitly address

3 Besides alluding to existing so-called surrogacy 'farms' in countries of the Global South (cf. Pande 2010, 971), *The Farm*'s title also serves as a reminder of the origins of ART in animal husbandry, in which breeding by means of IVF also followed the goal of producing profit (cf. Vint 2021, 75). The title can also be interpreted as an oblique and inverse reference to another form of fragmented and commercialized motherhood, that is, the historical practice of "baby-farming" in Victorian Britain, in which usually illegitimate children were given to baby-farmers in exchange for a fee (cf. Stuart-Bennett 2022).

the racialized logic which—reflecting earlier desires for racial purity (cf. Bahri 2019, 315)—underlies surrogacy. The text clearly signals this by stating repeatedly that, in order to qualify as a "Premium Host," a surrogate mother has to be "Caucasian" (see, for instance, Ramos 2019, 42, 172). In particular, the novel stages a highly racialized and classist conversation between Mae and Leon, in which they discuss options to further increase the profits which they reap by hiring gestational mother workers. In this conversation, which the novel clads in caricatural exaggerations in order to create some critical distance from Mae and Leon's highly discriminatory brainstorming, it becomes clear that—although characteristics such as socio-economic status also play a role in the selection of "Premium Hosts"—it is racialized ideas which ultimately determine whether a woman counts as "Premium" at the facility. While racialization thus remains crucial in Golden Oaks' business model, it is nonetheless modified by classist differentiation. By having Mae and Leon discuss the idea of hiring "lower-middle-class white girls" (Ramos 2019, 172–73) as surrogates, the novel vividly illustrates that, especially when privatized and market-oriented, innovations in reproductive science do not only "follo[w] patterns of resource extraction established by colonialism," but also increasingly extend them to "those not previously marginalized by race" (Vint 2021, 76, 60).

By emphasizing the racialized, classed, and gendered selection criteria at work in Golden Oaks, the novel shows that—exceeding the epigenetic influence of surrogate mothers by far—these criteria do not only betray the nexus between biocapitalism and racial as well as class politics, but are also indicative of how a biopolitical futurity perpetuates historical anxieties. On the one hand, these criteria rely on "a geopolitics of desire coupled with persistent anxieties about racial, and dare we say inter-class, mixture" (Bahri 2019, 315) which hark back to how earlier "anxiety about hybridity reflected the desire to keep races separate" (Young 1995, quoted in Bahri 2019, 315). On the other hand, the clients' choice of a surrogate mother also indicates what prominent a role self-optimization plays in reproductive futurism and biocapitalist precorporation: as reflected in Mae's thought that the surrogate mother serves most clients as "an emblem of the lofty expectations they have for the being to be implanted inside" (Ramos 2019, 42), the production of optimized offspring is seen as essential in being able to perpetuate through heteronormative reproduction a future social order which continues to guarantee exclusive privileges to those who already have them (cf. Edelman 2004, 2, 25).

Whereas, as shown above, at Golden Oaks, epigenetic influences are priced in as long as they are quantifiable and commodifiable, the novel's only counterpoints to such exclusively quantifiable biochemical and

mechanist understandings of optimized foetal development—naturalized and stereotypical frames of motherhood and child-rearing (see, for instance, Ramos 2019, 4, 6, 311)—themselves follow the logic of biocapitalist reproductive futurism. Although Jane retrospectively evaluates her pregnancy with Amalia as un-optimized, her daughter turns out to be gifted—a development which is depicted towards the end of the novel and which seems to result from the combination of Jane's motherly love for her daughter and Mae's influence on Amalia's competitive skills (cf. Ramos 2019, 313). In addition to representations of Jane and Amalia, the novel invokes naturalized frames of motherhood by including the memories which Reagan has of her own mother's beneficial influence during her childhood (cf. Ramos 2019, 134, 136, 147). Creating a stark contrast to this implicit normative standard, Mae's experiences serve as a foil which reinforces instead of questions these idealized frames of motherhood. Mae, for whom the surrogate mothers' alienated clinical labour is completely acceptable and who calls Golden Oaks her "baby" (Ramos 2019, 169), has never felt loved by her own mother (cf. Ramos 2019, 42). Yet, towards the end of the novel, when the novel suddenly begins to present Mae in a more favourable light, she also begins to wonder whether she is not forfeiting a chance if she does not carry her second child herself. Any nuanced representations of motherhood between these two extremes are, however, not included in the novel. Because of this, and despite the novel's attempt at providing some variations on the issue of nature versus nurture by focusing on Amalia, the only alternative to assisted reproduction which the text suggests as a way of securing one's offspring a place in a stratified future thus defaults to frames of naturalized conventional motherhood enhanced by competitive rearing.

The novel's epilogue shows exactly this: as Jane performs Mae and her husband's entire reproductive labour for their son (who, tellingly, is named Victor), Jane hopes to be able to provide Amalia with a better future. In the logic of *The Farm* and as suggested by the end of the novel, this better future consists of soaring as high as possible:

> "Mama, push me!" Amalia shouts, climbing onto the swing and flinging off her hat.
> […] "Hurry, Mama. Hurry!"
> Jane takes her place behind her daughter. She can push harder now without Victor to hold, and both arms free. "Hard or soft, Mali?"
> "The hardest!" cries Amalia. "The highest!" (Ramos 2019, 321)

Pushed as hard and as high as possible by their parents, who focus their entire strength on their offspring's reaching of superlatives, the child's internalized wish and ability to compete thus mark the ending of *The Farm*. Merging this neoliberal telos with its structurally prominent ending, the text consequently displays a considerable structural congruence with the very premises which also underlie the biocapitalist exploitation which *The Farm* tries to criticize. In an affirmative reading of the novel, this ending could be interpreted as illustrating the very inevitability of capitalist realism—that is, its inability to envision any alternative to capitalist societal models and precorporation (cf. Fisher 2009, 2). Nonetheless, as the novel presents its ending by means of naturalized and bionormative frames of motherhood—which the text itself has introduced in an affirmative way and which are in line with reproductive futurism—this article reads *The Farm* as not only negotiating and criticizing but as also being partially and ambivalently precorporated by biocapitalist realist premises itself.

Sociotechnical Imaginaries: Reproductive Futurism and Biocapitalist Realism in *The Farm*

As has been discussed so far, its attempts at a differentiated intersectional critique of the entanglement of biotechnology, neocolonialism, and capital notwithstanding, *The Farm*'s own biocapitalist realist mode undermines the novel's criticism of biocapitalist exploitation. This complicated relationship between the novel's content and form is what makes the present case study so insightful. While reproduction serves as a frequent object of research in studies on biocapitalism in the social sciences (see for instance Lettow 2015, 36–38; Cooper and Waldby 2014, 33–88), this article's reading of *The Farm* contributes to the research on biocapitalism by exploring its aesthetic reproduction. In particular, it shows that, if clad in a capitalist realist mode itself, a critique of biocapitalist inequalities falls short of addressing systemic relations and instead affirmatively negotiates individual competitiveness as a means of empowerment or of keeping pace with so-called biocapitalist enhancement. Moreover, given the "sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility" (Fisher 2009, 7) which underlies the capitalist realist inability to think in alternatives, exploring the nexus between this mode of writing and biocapitalist concerns with sterility can also contribute to explaining why infertility has become such a widespread topos in contemporary fiction (cf. Vint 2021, 22).

In addition to manifesting itself in the text's ending—which affirmatively reproduces the necessity for exceptional offspring instead of

presenting alternatives to it—the novel's capitalist realist mode is reflected in Mae's rhetoric or in detailed descriptions of luxury goods, which are imbued with a fascination for capitalist accumulation. Whereas most of the fascination for luxury goods in the text can be attributed to the choice of focalizers and to the absence of a non-implicated narrator, the novel's telos nonetheless affirmatively follows a logic of accumulation instead of redistribution or social justice (cf. Vint 2021, 8). If all of the focalizers are too implicated to reject a (self-)accumulative way of living, the novel nevertheless culminates in a capitalist realist iteration of reproductive futurism epitomized by the exceptional child, who—although the daughter of an immigrant—will further stabilize this order by thoroughly assimilating to while superficially diversifying the predominant order.

In combination with the text's significant historical and gender gaps, the novel's biocapitalist realist mode creates a sociotechnical imaginary which ultimately continues to rely on—and even reproduces—reproductive futurism. In fact, besides the novel's omission of the long history of forced surrogacy during slavery, there is also a paradoxical absence of a wider gender perspective in the text. Although some feminists and radical posthumanist thinkers argue that ART could be instrumental in deconstructing heterosexist and bionormative structures of procreation (cf. Lewis 2019; Karmakar and Parui 2020, 324–25; Browner 2016, 819; Harding 2011, 21),[4] none of these options are explored in the novel. Whereas ART offers "infertile women and couples and other individuals conventionally excluded from becoming parents (e.g., homosexuals, transgendered individuals, people living with HIV/AIDS, partnerless and postmenopausal women) the chance to reproduce" (Browner 2016, 819), *The Farm* focuses almost exclusively on postmenopausal women or women choosing to use a surrogate for aesthetic reasons (cf. Ramos 2019, 108, 218).[5] In addition, the novel neither addresses how ART "can also serve as a source of pressure, perpetuate gender inequalities, reinforce women's primary roles as mothers, and, perhaps most significantly, valorize biological reproduction above all other means of family formation" (Browner 2016, 819), nor does it interrogate the intersection of capitalism and the family as a vital structural principle in capitalist reproduction. Instead, the text juxtaposes the exploitative

4 On the "uncritical acceptance of technology as a liberating apparatus in feminist and radical posthumanist theory," see Karmakar and Parui 2020, 324–25.

5 Through a flashback, the text provides the information that Reagan donated her eggs to a "[s]table, college-educated Buddhist couple" (Ramos 2019, 77). Although not specified, this couple might be the novel's only mention of queer people using ART.

practices of ART with idealized frames of biological motherhood only. The sole alternative to exploitative surrogacy which the novel envisions thus relies on an affirmative nostalgia for naturalized frames of motherhood.

In sum, despite its attempt to explore the role of biocapitalism in exacerbating inequality, *The Farm* is too overdetermined by its own capitalist realist mode to be able to create a sociotechnical imaginary which overcomes or convincingly criticizes a highly stratified biocapitalist reproductive futurism. Instead, the text formally reduplicates the implications of a use of reproductive technologies which is "more conforming than liberating: they more often than not reinforce the status quo than challenge it" (Roberts 2001, quoted in Karmakar and Parui 2020, 326). So even if the text does try to forego universalizing notions of "life itself" and instead focuses on how biocapitalist developments further reinforce the stratification of reproduction, the blind spots in the text's own negotiation of biocapitalist reproduction nonetheless invite universalizing and biased readings which neglect that—far from speculatively dystopian—biocapitalism perpetuates the long history of stratified and exploitative reproduction.

Bibliography

Anderson, Warwick. 2002. "Introduction: Postcolonial Technoscience." *Social Studies of Science* 32 (5/6): 643–58.

Bahri, Deepika. 2019. "Gendering Hybridity: The Womb as Site of Production in Globalization." *Interventions* 21 (3): 301–17.

Browner, Carole H. 2016. "Reproduction: From Rights to Justice?" In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, 803–31. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cherry, April L. 2014. "The Rise of the Reproductive Brothel in the Global Economy: Some Thoughts on Reproductive Tourism, Autonomy, and Justice." *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law and Social Change* 17 (3): 257–89.

Colen, Shellee. 1995. "'Like a Mother to Them': Stratified Reproduction and West Indian Childcare Workers and Employers in New York." In *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*, edited by Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, 78–102. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cooper, Melinda. 2008. *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Cooper, Melinda, and Catherine Waldby. 2014. *Clinical Labor: Tissue Donors and Research Subjects in the Global Bioeconomy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Evans, Benjamin. 2019. "*The Farm* by Joanne Ramos Review—Atwood-Style Dystopia Debut." *The Guardian*. May 12, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/12/the-farm-joanne-ramos-review.

Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1975. *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*. Paris: Gallimard.

Gebauer, Carolin. 2020. "Dreading the Future: The Ethical Implications of Contemporary Speculative Fiction." *Diegesis* 9 (1): 20–38.

Gunnarsson Payne, Jenny. 2019. "Grammars of Kinship: Biological Motherhood and Assisted Reproduction in the Age of Epigenetics." In *Transnationalising Reproduction: Third Party Conception in a Globalised World*, edited by Róisín Ryan-Flood and Jenny Gunnarsson Payne, 13–33. New York: Routledge.

Harding, Sandra. 2011. "Introduction: Beyond Postcolonial Theory: Two Undertheorized Perspectives on Science and Technology." In *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader*, edited by Sandra Harding, 1–31. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Heing, Bridey. 2019. "Surrogacy Takes a Dystopian Turn in Joanne Ramos' Debut Novel *The Farm*." *Paste*. May 22, 2019. https://www.pastemagazine.com/books/joanne-ramos/the-farm-by-joanne-ramos-dystopia.

Jasanoff, Sheila. 2015. "Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imaginations of Modernity." In *Dreams of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*, edited by Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, 1–33. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Karmakar, Manali, and Avishek Parui. 2020. "'These Were Made-to-Order Babies': Reterritorialised Kinship, Neoliberal Eugenics and Artificial Reproductive Technology in Kishwar Desai's *Origins of Love*." *Medical Humanities* 46 (3): 323–32.

Lettow, Susanne. 2015. "Biokapitalismus und Inwertsetzung der Körper: Perspektiven der Kritik." *PROKLA. Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft* 178 (1): 33–49.

Lettow, Susanne. 2018. "Biocapitalism." *Krisis* 38 (2): 13–14.

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

Mendes, Ana Cristina, and Lisa Lau. 2019. "A Postcolonial Framing of International Commercial Gestational Surrogacy in India: Re-Orientalisms and Power Differentials in Meera Syal's *The House of Hidden Mothers*." *Interventions* 21 (3): 318–36.

Pande, Amrita. 2010. "Commercial Surrogacy in India: Manufacturing a Perfect Mother-Worker." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35 (4): 969–92.

Phelan, Hayley. 2019. "A Different Handmaid's Tale: On Joanne Ramos's *The Farm*." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. July 13, 2019. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-different-handmaids-tale-joanne-ramoss-the-farm.

Pravinchandra, Shital. 2016. "One Species, Same Difference? Postcolonial Critique and the Concept of Life." *New Literary History: Special Issue on Climate, Species, Anthropocene* 47 (1): 27–48.

Rajan, Kaushik Sunder. 2006. *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ramos, Joanne. 2019. *The Farm*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Rose, Nikolas. 2007. *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sándor, Judit. 2019. "From Assisted to Selective Reproduction: Through the Lens of the Court." In *Transnationalising Reproduction: Third Party Conception in a Globalised World,* edited by Róisín Ryan Flood and Jenny Gunnarsson Payne, 174–94. New York: Routledge.

Seth, Suman. 2017. "Colonial History and Postcolonial Science Studies." *Radical History Review* 127: 63–85.

Stuart-Bennett, Joshua. 2022. *Motherhood, Respectability and Baby-Farming in Victorian and Edwardian London*. London: Routledge.

Twine, France Winddance. 2015. *Outsourcing the Womb: Race, Class and Gestational Surrogacy in a Global Market*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Vint, Sherryl. 2021. *Biopolitical Futures in Twenty-First-Century Speculative Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weinbaum, Alys Eve. 2019. *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wing-Fai, Leung. 2014. "Perceptions of the East—Yellow Peril: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear." *The Irish Times*, August 16, 2014. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/perceptions-of-the-east-yellow-peril-an-archive-of-anti-asian-fear-1.1895696.

Wurr, Julia. 2024. "Surrogacy and Dystopian Positionality: Narrative Reproduction between Speculative Fiction and Chick Lit," in "Gender Medicine: Global Perspectives on the Entanglement between Biomedicine, Socio-Cultural, and Political Construct," edited by Manali Karmakar and Binu Sahayam D, special issue, *Asian Journal of Medical Humanities* 3 (1): 1–15.