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# Technologies of Reproduction Across the Lifecourse: Expanding Reproductive Studies

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# Table of Contents

List of Tables and Figures	<i>xi</i>
About the Contributors	<i>xiii</i>
Foreword <i>Rene Almeling</i>	<i>xvii</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xxi</i>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction: Technologies of Reproduction Across the Lifecourse</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Katharine Dow and Victoria Boydell</i>	
<b>Reflection One: Knowledge</b>	<b>21</b>
<i>Victoria Boydell and Katharine Dow</i>	
<b>Section One: Reproductive Technologies Across the Lifecourse</b>	
<b>Chapter 2 ‘I Feel Like Some Kind of Namoon’: Examining Sterilisation in Women’s Abortion Trajectories in India</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>Rishita Nandagiri</i>	
<b>Chapter 3 When Time Becomes Biological: Experiences of Age- Related Infertility and Anticipation in Reproductive Medicine</b>	<b>49</b>
<i>Nolwenn Bühler</i>	

<b>Chapter 4</b> <b>Delaying Menopause, Buying Time? Positioning Ovarian Tissue Cryopreservation and Transplantation Technologies for Delaying Menopause in the Context of Women’s Embodied Reproductive Choice and Agency Across the Lifecourse</b>	67
<i>Susan Pickard</i>	
<b>Chapter 5</b> <b>Chronic Uncertainty and Modest Expectations: Navigating Fertility Desires in the Context of Life With Endometriosis</b>	83
<i>Nicky Hudson and Caroline Law</i>	
<b>Reflection Two: Choice</b>	101
<i>Victoria Boydell and Katharine Dow</i>	
<b>Section Two: Lifecourses of Reproductive Technologies</b>	
<b>Chapter 6</b> <b>Contraceptive Futures? The Hormonal Body, Populationism and Reproductive Justice in the Face of Climate Change</b>	109
<i>Nayantara Sheoran Appleton</i>	
<b>Chapter 7</b> <b>Spectacular Reproduction Revealed: Genetic Genealogy Testing as a Re(tro)productive Technology</b>	131
<i>Sallie Han</i>	
<b>Chapter 8</b> <b>Getting the Timing Right: Fertility Apps and the Temporalities of Trying to Conceive</b>	149
<i>Josie Hamper</i>	
<b>Chapter 9</b> <b>Bio-Genetics and/at the Border: The Structural Intimacies of LGBTQ Transnational Kinship</b>	163
<i>Sonja Mackenzie</i>	
<b>Chapter 10</b> <b>A Balancing Act: Situating Reproductive Technologies Across Time in the UK</b>	185
<i>Victoria Boydell</i>	
<b>Reflection Three: Relationality</b>	203
<i>Victoria Boydell and Katharine Dow</i>	



**Section Three: Reading Across Reproductive Technologies**

<b>Chapter 11 ‘Well, She’s Entitled to Her Choice’: Negotiating Technologies Amidst Anticipatory Futures of Reproductive Potential</b>	209
<i>Ben Kasstan</i>	
<b>Chapter 12 Men as Irrational Variables in Family Planning? Understanding the Landscape, Technological Advancements, and Extending Health Psychology Theories and Models</b>	225
<i>Amanda Wilson</i>	
<b>Chapter 13 Inclusion, Exclusion, Anticipation: How the Politics of Intimate Relationships Structure Innovation</b>	247
<i>Ryan Whitacre</i>	
<b>Chapter 14 Integrating Reproductive and Nonreproductive Technologies: Egg Freezing and Medical Abortion</b>	261
<i>Lucy van de Wiel</i>	
<b>Afterword</b>	285
<i>Victoria Boydell and Katharine Dow</i>	



## List of Tables and Figures

Table 1.	MOHFW's Financial Incentives for Private Facilities and NGOs. All in Indian Rupees (INRs) (1 INR = 0.014 USD) (MOHFW, 2016).	34
Table 2.	Data on Vasectomies, Tubectomies and Abortions in Karnataka (2017–2018).	36
Figure 1.	Table 1: Evra Users (All-Subjects Treated) in Studies –004, –003, –002.	253
Figure 2.	Table 3: Phase III Efficacy/Safety Studies. Submitted to the European Medicines Association in the New Drug Application for Evra.	254

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## Foreword

There is sometimes a strange moment toward the end of a research project where the main noun, the primary object of one's analysis, begins to shimmer, starts to feel unstable and seems as though it might actually slip out of view completely. This happened to me as I was finishing my most recent book, *GUYnecology* (2020), a history and sociology of why there has been so little attention to men's reproductive health. As I was writing the conclusion, a phrase I had used throughout the book, and which I've encountered hundreds if not thousands of times in the work of others – 'reproductive body' – suddenly seemed vague. More than vague: thoroughly devoid of substantive meaning. What was, and is, a reproductive body? Using 'a' as an article instead of 'the' in front of reproductive body seems to open up the possibilities a bit, but does not begin to answer crucial questions about which parts of whose bodies would one demarcate as specifically (exclusively?) reproductive?

Reading through this marvelous collection of research essays edited by Vicky Boydell and Katie Dow makes me think that this phenomenon, the feeling of losing one's grasp on precisely the thing you've just spent months or years studying, can happen not only with particular research projects but with entire fields. It appears to be happening at the moment in the social scientific study of reproduction, as scholars train their attention on some of the core terms in the field, raising questions about how they have been defined, what they include and what they do not, and identifying the assumptions on which they are based. Far from cause for concern, I think this process heralds the continuing growth and expansion of a field, and it makes possible exciting new opportunities for thinking about what comes next.

In the Introduction to this volume, Boydell and Dow argue for the integration of research on reproductive technologies, noting that they are defining both 'reproductive' and 'technologies' in expansive ways. In doing so, they are building on long-standing efforts by anthropologists, sociologists and historians to examine the wide range of social, cultural and historical processes that shape individual experiences of reproduction, which can include pregnancy, birth, contraception, abortion and a wide array of reproductive technologies. Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (1991) offered a powerfully generative label for conceptualising these processes – the politics of reproduction – and the subsequent outpouring of research provided the basis for my own working definition of reproduction: 'the biological and social process of having or not having children' (Almeling, 2015, p. 430).

Boydell and Dow's integrative framework takes up this approach to reproduction and enlivens it with empirically innovative studies of reproductive technologies. In particular, the essays in this volume illustrate the importance of comparative research, such as comparisons of how individuals experience different kinds of reproductive technologies (Kasstan; Van de Wiel; Whitacre) and comparisons of their experiences at different points in the lifecourse (Nandagiri; Boydell). Indeed, Boydell and Dow's emphasis on temporality ensures that scholars are thinking longitudinally not only about the past and the present (Hudson and Law; Han) but also how reproductive technologies figure into 'anticipated futures' (Buhler; Hamper; Pickard). Importantly, this volume expands beyond the experiences of cis-women, the typical population researched by reproductive scholars, to include men's and LGBTQI people's experiences of reproductive technologies (Mackenzie; Wilson; Appleton). And like so many others working in the vibrant politics-of-reproduction tradition, the editors and contributors to this volume emphasise how the inner workings of governments and markets and biomedicine have real consequences for the reproductive aspects of people's everyday lives.

In essence, Boydell and Dow's integrative approach to research on reproductive technologies expands the viewscope well beyond the traditional 'snapshot', in which researchers concentrate on a single reproductive technology at a particular point in time and place for one group of people. It makes possible new questions about the relationship between processes that are usually considered somewhat distinct, such as those around contraceptive and conceptive technologies. Going forward, there is an ongoing need to analyse how reproductive technologies and reproductive processes more broadly, from the cellular to the global, are shaped not only by gendered norms and beliefs but also by inequalities rooted in racism and heteronormativity, as well as widely varying levels of economic and educational resources across and within countries (e.g. Briggs, 2018; Roberts, 1997; Ross & Solinger, 2017). In addition to several of the essays in this volume that take an intersectional approach, I would also encourage readers to seek out Natali Valdez and Daisy Deomampo's (2019) excellent special issue of *Medical Anthropology* on race, racism, and reproduction.

Of course, there will never be one correct, true-through-all-of-history answer to questions such as what is a reproductive body or what is reproduction or what is reproductive justice. Decades of social scientific and humanistic scholarship on science and bodies, and especially research on processes surrounding gender, race, sexuality, ability and their intersections, reveal that definitions, understandings, and experiences of reproductive processes are rooted in particular times and places and approaches, the latter of which can be academic, activist or neither. The impossibility of objectivity is not a fact to mourn, but an invitation to consider the full range of complexities in how knowledge is made and the uses to which it can be put. It is a chance to deepen our understanding of the nouns we work with, to examine the assumptions built into these seemingly straightforward words and an opportunity to use such reflections to ask new questions.

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June 2021

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