

# Bio-Reproductive Futurism

*Bare Life and the Pregnant Refugee in  
Alfonso Cuarón's Children of Men*

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**Heather Latimer**

The introduction of citizenship identity for the fetus brings with it a new terrain on which the anxieties of nationals and democracy play out.

—Janine P. Holc, “The Purest Democrat: Fetal Citizenship and Subjectivity in the Construction of Democracy in Poland”

Only on tape and records do we now hear the voices of children, only on film or on television programmes do we see the bright, moving images of the young. Some find them unbearable to watch but most feed on them as they might a drug.

—P. D. James, *The Children of Men*

Giorgio Agamben's work on biopolitics, the political regulation and generation of biological life, and his theory of “bare life,” or life with no political meaning, has been the topic of extensive academic debate and critique since he published *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* in 1995.<sup>1</sup> Theorists concerned with the relationship between biological life and political subjectivity have used Agamben's work to think through topics such as the production of citizenship, the process of legal abandonment, and how the state maintains its sovereignty over the conditions of life.<sup>2</sup> Feminist theorists, however, have noted a critical absence in Agamben's work when it comes to women and gender, and have argued that we are not all subject to bare life in the same ways.<sup>3</sup> This article continues their critique through an examination of how the reproductive body complicates Agamben's concept of bare life and its corresponding figure, *homo sacer*, or sacred man.<sup>4</sup> It does so through a discussion of Alfonso Cuarón's

2006 film *Children of Men*, looking at how the film uses its story line to tie pregnancy to biopolitical systems that regulate who does and does not get counted as worthy of state protection.

An adaptation of English author P. D. James's 1992 novel, *The Children of Men*, Cuarón's film is set in 2027 and follows the events that unfold when one woman is discovered to be pregnant eighteen years after the world has descended into chaos and global war since women stopped being able to reproduce.<sup>5</sup> The film takes a particularly North American and post-9/11 angle in its adaptation, changing English characters into American ones and evoking obvious visual parallels to the war in Iraq, Abu Ghraib prison, and the Guantánamo Bay detention camp through its settings, as well as referencing other devastating events such as the Holocaust, mad cow disease, and the London bomb blasts.<sup>6</sup> The most obvious change it makes is the character of Kee (played by Claire-Hope Ashitey), who does not exist in the novel but takes a leading role in the film as the black illegal immigrant, or "foogie," who is living in London and working as a prostitute and who becomes pregnant. Kee is taken under the wing of an activist named Julian (played by Julianne Moore), who is the character who becomes pregnant in the novel. When Julian is murdered by her own political group, the Fishes—a group committed to ending England's ban on immigration since the global downturn—Kee goes on the run with our hero, Theo, Julian's old lover (played by Clive Owen). Theo helps Kee escape from the Fishes, hide her pregnancy from government officials, give birth in a refugee camp, and find her way to the coastline, where she hopes to meet up with a humanitarian group of scientists called the Human Project. Throughout her flight, Kee and her miracle pregnancy/child not only motivate Theo to become a better, selfless person, but also mobilize Julian and the Fishes into direct action, inspire great sacrifice from other characters, and fill everyone they meet with hope for the future.<sup>7</sup>

Besides these major plot and character changes, the film also alters the book's central reproductive premise, as in James's novel the world is sterile because all sperm suddenly loses its potency, but in the film all women mysteriously stop being able to stay pregnant. Connected to this is how the world reacts to this infertility. While the political effects of global sterility in the novel are apathy, hopelessness, and complacency, in the film infertility, if not directly leading to, has certainly played a considerable part in the spread of world war, fascism, and terrorism. England has become a destination for refugees from around the world, and everyday English life now involves suicide bombs, security checks, and teams of police sent to round up illegal immigrants and lock them in cages on the streets. These changes extend to the differences between the political dissidents in the novel and in the film as well. In the novel, for instance, the Fishes have only five members who are mostly idealistic and compassionate. However, in the

film's world of state violence, the Fishes are a huge network of activists who are politically ambitious and thrive in a complex system of organizations and safe houses. The film makes it clear the government is the enemy, fascism has led to a situation in which even the Fishes are corrupt, and terror is the order of the day. In short, humanity has become as bankrupt and as barren as the world's wombs.

In what follows I focus on this link, examining how the film connects infertility and pregnancy to ideas about terrorism and the status of the refugee and questioning what this connection can tell us about our contemporary imaginings of biopolitics. Starting with an analysis of Agamben's figuration of the refugee, or *homo sacer*, as having the potential to sever personhood from the nation-state, I argue that the reproductive body is a blank spot in Agamben's definition of bare life. I further argue that the film highlights this blank spot by demonstrating that reproductive politics, generally, and arguments about fetal citizenship, specifically, are fundamental to our current biopolitical system. Agamben argues that it is possible to be physically alive but politically abandoned, and this is clearly the position Kee occupies as an "illegal" immigrant in the film. However, as I outline, she gains political agency through the protection already afforded her fetus. Therefore, the film also shows us how it is possible to be politically protected but not yet physically alive through its focus on the status of the unborn child. Kee's body becomes the battleground for these two opposing forces as the film offers a critique of the politics of migration at the same time as it fetishizes the future child. In this fetishization, the film supports what Lauren Berlant terms "fetal citizenship" and what Lee Edelman describes as "reproductive futurism," a process in which the image of the future child comes to stand in for the very idea of the future itself.<sup>8</sup> The film therefore engages in a form of what I call "bio-reproductive futurism" that complicates Agamben's analysis of bare life by using the fetus as the ultimate symbol of hope in a time of terror. In overlapping the refugee's body with the pregnant woman's body, the film offers a representation of the limits of our biopolitical system by figuring the fetus, or not-yet-here child, as the counterpoint to bare life.

In my analysis I take a very different approach from that of either Cuarón or the film's most famous commentator, Slavoj Žižek, by claiming that the film's reproductive politics are fundamental to understanding its other biopolitical considerations. Cuarón, for instance, is adamantly ambivalent about the reproductive side of the film's story line, and in interviews he claims that the film's premise of a futuristic infertile world is insignificant and is "just a metaphor" for the current state of humanity.<sup>9</sup> Explaining that he "decided to not even care about [the infertility] and just take it as a point of departure," Cuarón states that he found James's idea of a childless world "haunting," so much so that he "realized that the premise

could serve as a metaphor for the fading sense of hope that humanity has today.”<sup>10</sup> Žižek echoes these sentiments in the film’s DVD commentary when he states that he, too, sees the film as having little to do with its story line. Instead, what he claims the film gives us is a hyper-real version of our current reality in that what is shown in the background—a destroyed environment, suffering refugees, terrorist attacks, and other effects of global capitalism—is the real story. As he states, the film shows us “a society without a history, or to use another political term, biopolitics. . . . [T]he basic problem in this society as depicted in the film is literally biopolitics: how to generate, regulate life.”<sup>11</sup> For Žižek, the film’s premise of an infertile world is a metaphor for the ideological despair of late capitalism: “the true infertility is the very lack of meaningful historical experience.”<sup>12</sup> This infertility reflects a sort of cultural impotency or stasis, and the story line of a miracle pregnancy and birth is a metaphor for a reawakening of political or cultural hope.

Undoubtedly these metaphors do their job, as the film’s spectacular background images of human suffering and bleak landscapes certainly tell their own story apart from the plotline. Despite an effective use of symbolization and metaphor, however, viewers are still left watching a film that revolves around a story line about infertility and pregnancy. As E. Ann Kaplan argues, Cuarón’s and Žižek’s repeated claims that the real story is behind the story means that the film is essentially split in two—the one viewers watch, the pregnancy film; and the one Cuarón insists is the “true” story.<sup>13</sup> As Kaplan surmises, Cuarón’s dismissal of the pregnancy film only acts as “bait” to feminist viewers, who can see that just as James’s idea of a childless world is “haunting” to Cuarón, the film’s reproductive politics haunt his attempts to separate the story line of infertility and pregnancy from the film’s “actual” themes of globalization, terrorism, and the despair of late capitalism.

Yes, infertility clearly symbolizes the state of humanity in the film, but the film’s reproductive politics cannot be confined solely to the level of metaphor. Even further, I suggest that these reproductive politics are integral to the film’s exploration of what Cuarón and Žižek see as its “real” themes. The film’s focus on the effects of globalization, capitalism, and migration means that it engages with ideas about futurity, nation, and family. These ideas, in turn, are linked to reproductive politics in a manner that goes well beyond the scope of the film or its use of metaphors. This means that the film not only engages in reproductive politics in an obvious way through its story line, but also in a much more subtle way through its exploration of these other themes connected to the failings of democracy, the effects of terrorism, and the status of the human. My aim is not to prove Cuarón or Žižek wrong in their analysis that the film is about the state of humanity and the effects of global capitalism. Rather, it is to say that the

film's story line acts as more than just a metaphor because its reproductive politics are vital to how viewers make sense of its other politics. Put another way, it is because it does *not* seem strange that a film about mass infertility should also be one about the end of humanity and the spread of terror that we can assume the film's reproductive politics are more than simply a point of departure.

### **Sacred (Wo)Men**

In further online commentary on the film, titled "The Clash of Civilizations at the End of History," Žižek elaborates on how he sees *Children of Men* engaging in biopolitics, stating that the film strikes at the very heart of what ails us as a world today—the tyranny of modern-day democracy.<sup>14</sup> To describe how the film engages with this tyranny, especially in relation to the current "war on terror," Žižek makes reference to *homo sacer*—one whom the state can kill at will because his or her life holds no legal value. This is an apt analogy to what Cuarón is showing us, considering the film's obvious visual allusions to both Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib prison. Literally, the film shows a world where the streets are a prison and where the logic of Guantánamo dictates all life, so that anyone can be killed by the state at any time with impunity. Žižek's reference is indicative of how pervasive Agamben's theory has become in recent years. Agamben's analysis of *homo sacer* and "the state of exception" is often used to help understand exactly what Žižek claims Cuarón is able to show us: how the logic of capitalist democracy lends itself so easily to fascism.<sup>15</sup> It also sheds light on why the figure of the refugee and the figure of the fetus/child appear together in a film that is so concerned with the topic of democracy. It is no coincidence that these two liminal figures make an appearance in a film about human rights, as they not only aptly reflect the political goals laid out in the film but also reveal the limits of the biopolitical system itself.

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben introduces an obscure figure from Roman law named "homo sacer," or sacred man. In Roman times homo sacer was a legal designation for one who was excluded by and from juridical law. Cast out of the city by a sovereign ban—through abandonment—homo sacer could be killed but not sacrificed, in that taking his life was considered neither homicide nor divinity. As Agamben states, homo sacer was outside the arena of mediating law and as such was the original figure of "bare life."<sup>16</sup> Banned from the city and exposed to death, homo sacer was excluded from *bios*, which is political or community life, and instead embodied the concept of *zoē*, or "the simple fact of living." Applying this framework to modern biopolitics, Agamben argues that the politicization of *zoē*—the entry of homo sacer or bare life into the political realm itself—is

what characterizes modern politics. As he states, “Democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zoë*. . . . [I]t is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak the *bios* of *zoë*.” It is through biopolitical forms of exception and exclusion that some are made to live and others are left to die.<sup>17</sup>

For Agamben, bare life—life exposed to the force of death—is what characterizes the modern sovereign state in that it is the very creation of the state of exception (the sovereign ban that allows *homo sacer* to exist in the first instance) that brings sovereignty into being. The process of suspending the law in the state of exception is the basis of sovereign power, as through exclusion “the sovereign decides not the licit and illicit but the originary inclusion of the living in the sphere of law.” In this way, “bare life remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something which is included only through exclusion.” While Agamben cites the concentration camp as the most obvious model of the state of exception, and the refugee as the most current instance of *homo sacer*, he argues that instead of functioning as an archaic legal category, *homo sacer* now functions as our current way of political life. We are all now “virtually *homines sacri*.”<sup>18</sup> Or, as Catherine Mills states, we are all “at least potentially if not actually abandoned by the law and exposed to violence as a constitutive condition of political existence.”<sup>19</sup> Žižek explains that this reveals that “our most elementary ‘zero’ position is that of an object of biopolitics . . . [P]olitical and citizenship rights are given to us as a secondary gesture, in accordance with biopolitical strategic considerations.”<sup>20</sup> The very conditions that originally created the sovereign’s ability to decide who did and did not count as living—as human—are now included in the mechanisms and calculations of state power such that at any point any of us could be *homo sacer*.

The film’s relationship to this system of logic is indicated from its very first moments, when viewers hear two news broadcasters read the morning headlines over an opening scene in which Theo enters a café full of people staring at a television. These voices juxtapose news of the ratification of a homeland security certificate, which continues the closure of British borders to all immigrants, with a story of worldwide grieving and hysteria over the death of the world’s youngest citizen, an eighteen-year-old referred to as Baby Diego. As Theo buys a coffee, viewers realize the reason the café is full is because people are horrified and enraptured by the news of Baby Diego’s death. Seconds later, Theo leaves the café just as it blows up from a bomb, and the film begins (see fig. 1).

In this one scene we see how biopolitics is tied in the film to various systems that regulate who does and does not get counted as worthy of state protection and care; the hysterical grieving for “the world’s last baby,” for instance, happens amid a political climate in which suicide bombs are part



Figure 1. A café blows up behind Theo (Clive Owen) in *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2006). Copyright Universal Pictures

of everyday life and hundreds of thousands of people have been abandoned by the British state for being “illegal,” having essentially become *homines sacri*. This situation, with one life so treasured and valued at the same time as others are completely effaced, eerily evokes our own biopolitical paradoxes, such as the frenzy in the U.S. media over Terri Schiavo’s life support situation in 2005, which coincided not only with other events at the time, such as the war in Iraq, but also with the United States’ abandonment of citizens after hurricane Katrina.<sup>21</sup> The first scene also foreshadows Kee’s reproductive role in the film and the biopolitical paradox she finds herself in as a pregnant refugee.

Agamben argues that the modern sovereign system cannot successfully regulate *zoë* in the name of *bios* because it cannot guarantee that birth immediately leads to citizenship; sovereign power is only created through an act of exclusion, and the refugee is the example par excellence of the system’s limit because she or he reveals this lack. Kee is a good example of this system and its lack. For instance, it would be impossible for the state to claim her or her future child as “English,” because England only exists through her political exclusion. This means she poses a danger to the nation-state, as she too obviously calls into question Žižek’s secondary gesture. As Agamben argues, the refugee represents a crisis in the sover-

eign system by “radically calling into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state, from the birth-nation link to the man-citizen link.”<sup>22</sup> What I would like to call attention to, however, is how Kee’s reproductive body complicates Agamben’s celebration of the refugee as having the potential to sever personhood from the nation-state. Kee may pose danger to the sovereign model of government as a refugee, forcing us to consider that we are all potentially reducible to bare life and to her position, but her reproductive body complicates Agamben’s assertion that we are all sacred men.

Agamben quite obviously sidesteps gender in his analysis of bare life. However, as Geraldine Pratt argues, “there are real limitations to generalizing across the experiences of men and women, and across racialized and gendered forms of abandonment.”<sup>23</sup> Pratt finds Agamben’s lack of gender analysis “perplexing” because the distinction he makes between biological life and political life is clearly related to the distinction between public and private life, an area amply explored within feminist scholarship. She states that it is “inconceivable” that bare life works in “a uniform way for men and women,” especially considering the way “women’s issues are often depoliticized by being enclaved within the private sphere, while woman are simultaneously less able than men to maintain the stability of the distinction between private and public.”<sup>24</sup> I argue that the divide between public and private life is especially collapsed for pregnant women, who face a particular set of biopolitical considerations and whose private behavior is routinely scrutinized and made a matter of public concern. For example, in order to access prenatal health care, a pregnant woman must become part of the institutionalization of the pregnant body and enter a discourse of fetal harm and care, via a set of social, medical, and cultural technologies concerned with testing, ultrasound, diagnosis, prognosis, and behavior management. She will also commonly, and sometimes legally, be required to efface her subjectivity in favor of the perceived needs of her fetus.<sup>25</sup> That this situation is not only commonplace but seen as part of a normal and healthy pregnancy reveals that reproductive biopolitics, like all biopolitics, are about methods of “apprehending, controlling and administering life.”<sup>26</sup> They are therefore part of the legal processes of sovereignty that Agamben outlines, in that they reveal women’s bodies as key biopolitical targets in debates about how future generations should be brought into the world, about which lives are valued and why, and about whose decisions should be regulated, protected, and granted individual rights.

On the other end of the reproductive gamut, biopolitical targeting also takes place for women who do not want to be pregnant and must engage with the state in order to obtain an abortion. In “The Inversion of Exceptionality: Foucault, Agamben, and ‘Reproductive Rights,’” Penelope Deutscher notes that in most countries abortions are only available through

legal states of exception that continue to render it illegal except in some circumstances (such as rape or to protect a woman's health), and through decriminalization rather than legalization, such as in Canada.<sup>27</sup> Even in cases like *Roe v. Wade*, in which it appears that women have secured legal access to abortion, "the law deems this access as either tenuous or an exception, however broad, and regulates the reinscribed possibility that women might not have that access." She argues that these laws have a "spectral and inverted relationship" to the other states of exception and instances of bare life that Agamben describes. She compares abortion laws to a state of exception more commonly associated with Agamben's work—the USA Patriot Act (26 October 2001)—which grants, in Deutscher's words, "a blanket exception to liberties otherwise covered under the First, Fourth, Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments, which may be suspended in the 'exceptional' circumstance of suspicion of terrorist activity." Like the USA Patriot Act, abortion statutes often also put aside previous laws, suspending them to various degrees. Deutscher argues, therefore, that these two cases "may be considered exercises, forms, and constructions of sovereignty . . . [W]hether the exception seems to protect while concurrently stressing the vulnerability of women's reproductive autonomy, or whether it seems to defend a state while weakening civil liberties, bodies are being intensified, weakened and invested with their possible exposure to violence."<sup>28</sup>

In the one case, potential terrorists are used to weaken civil liberties, while in the other case, pregnant women are seen as needing reproductive control. Deutscher argues that the only way this configuration makes sense is if the pregnant woman is imagined as a "potentially murderous competing sovereign whose self-interest wholly thwarts the intervening motivations of the state concerned with the [fetus]." The fetus, on the other hand, is figured neither as "*zoë*, *bios*, bare life, nor *homo sacer*" but is "rhetorically and varyingly depicted as all of these." Deutscher concludes that in this rhetorical production of fetal life as pseudo-homo sacer it is in fact the woman who becomes reduced to actual homo sacer, potentially reducible to naked life through her reducibility to reproductive life: "As she is figured as that which exposes another life, she is herself gripped, exposed, and reduced to barer life."<sup>29</sup>

While the film does not figure Kee exactly as the dangerous sovereign Deutscher describes, it does point out the complicated biopolitical relationships she occupies. If she is originally subject to bare life through her status as a refugee, she is then resubjected to another form of bare life through her reproductive body. As a refugee, Kee may be abandoned by the state through laws like the USA Patriot Act, but she is further marginalized through her vulnerability to other forms of sovereignty focused on her pregnant body. In other words, the film's focus on her future child as the ultimate citizen complicates her status as a refugee by appealing to a

type of fetal citizenship that threatens to erase her even further into bare life. As I argue in the next section, this erasure, in turn, reveals not only some of the gendered dimensions of legal abandonment but also some of the “pro-life” dimensions of reproductive biopolitics.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Fantasy of the Child**

One of the more disturbing aspects of James’s novel is that the political effects of global sterility are apathy and complacency. The English population has become so apathetic and depressed that as long as they have “freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom from boredom,” they go along subserviently with the government’s terrible solutions to the problems of an aging population.<sup>31</sup> No one votes, no one notices when people are mysteriously shipped off to a penal colony, and no one protests when the government enforces group suicides/murders of the population’s oldest and weakest. Immigrants are brought into England to serve as indentured nurses, and no one cares when they are shipped home to die. People look the other way when old women walk around with dolls in baby carriages or dress their pets up as children. It is as if the lack of children leads to a lack of any sense of “the future,” so that there is a complete “undoing of social organization, collective reality and, inevitably, life itself.”<sup>32</sup> While this sense of hopelessness certainly exists in the film as well, the film’s infertility is not directly linked to political or cultural apathy. Instead, what Cuarón shows us is a setting in which worldwide infertility is directly connected to the massive spread of nuclear war, terrorism, and fascism. Many people, such as our hero, Theo, are depressed and disillusioned, but they are certainly not purposefully ignorant of their social reality, as in the novel, nor are they complacent out of indifference—they live instead in a state of almost constant anxiety and total despair.

Of course it is this juxtaposition in the film that I want to explore, as the film naturalizes the connection between reproduction and the state of humanity in ways that are both unsettling and indicative of how deeply these themes are already culturally connected. Even though Cuarón attempts to sideline the theme of reproduction in the film (perhaps because of this attempt, actually), the film’s metaphorical connection between reproduction and the state of humanity suggests a direct correlation between infertility and terror, and pregnancy and hope. This correlation not only eerily evokes political talk about the sacredness of family values in connection to the war on terrorism, but perhaps more disturbingly it also plays off some of the strongest contentions of America’s evangelical pro-life movement: the ideas that abortion could bring on the apocalypse, that infertility is a punishment, that if women were to somehow stop having children the result would be worldwide destruction and dehumanization,

and that protecting the fetus, or the future child, from women's reproductive choices, their whims and desires, is the only way to protect the future, the nation, and the family. What this suggests, in turn, is not that *Children of Men* is a pro-life film, but that the connection between these themes is so commonplace culturally and biopolitically that a film about reproduction cannot help but engage with this narrative.

The film's relationship to this narrative is indicated in its advertising campaign, with one of its promotional posters revolving around the overly signified image of a free-floating fetus.<sup>33</sup> This fetus is perfectly formed, floats alone in a clear bubble, and is set against a plain black background without the body of the pregnant woman who presumably holds this fetus inside her anywhere in sight. As Valerie Hartouni, Lauren Berlant, Donna Haraway, and others have noted, the image of the free-floating fetus has become so prevalent and deeply caught up in pro-life politics in America that it has become an icon.<sup>34</sup> It now represents "an independent fetal subject with interests and rights of its own imaginable at the expense of pregnant women who are rendered invisible."<sup>35</sup> This iconography is so effective that although this poster is not actually a representation of a real-life fetus, it nonetheless works as a performative discursive practice by producing what it claims to represent, a fetal subject. This means that those viewing the film's poster must go so far as to actually remind themselves that this is not an image of a "little person" floating peacefully in space completely viable on its own. When considered alongside the accompanying tagline—"In 20 years, women are infertile. No Children. No Future. No Hope. But all that can change in a heartbeat"—it is not a stretch to imagine the poster as a pro-life advertisement in its own right, especially considering the film's emphasis on women's culpability for this state of hopelessness and the focus on the heartbeat, which has been one of the central areas of attack in the pro-life movement.

Obviously, the film's poster is not a pro-life advertisement, but it does suggest the degree to which pro-life discourse has so saturated public thinking about the fetus as to now set the terms of that discourse "and seem part of the fabric of fact."<sup>36</sup> Further, this poster elaborates overtly what the film's premise suggests: that there will be an end to the world as we know it, an end to the very idea of the future itself, if we do not protect our future children and citizens by safeguarding the fetus and ensuring that women continue to reproduce. It also suggests that this worldwide catastrophe could be stopped, and apocalypse diverted, simply through a fetus's beating heart. In "America, 'Fat,' the Fetus," Lauren Berlant notes that it is this logic that has led to a state of fetal citizenship, whereby "the pregnant woman becomes the child to the fetus, becoming more minor and less politically represented than the fetus, which is in turn more privileged by law, paternity, and other less institutional family strategies of contemporary American culture."<sup>37</sup>

Analyzing what she sees as “a contemporary national and mass cultural fixation on turning women into children and babies into persons through the media of photography and cinema,” Berlant argues that the fetus has become a super-person, or a super-citizen through the pro-life movement’s successful merging of an “American counter discourse of minority rights with a revitalized Providential nationalist rhetoric.” The result is that the fetus is now commonly imagined as an unprotected person, or a citizen without a country, vulnerable and “unjustly imprisoned in its mother’s hostile gulag.” Appearing to constitute personhood in its “natural completeness, prior to the fractures of history and identity,” the fetus in the film’s poster, as well as the one in the film, is posited as the ultimate citizen and as the solution to our current and *future* problems—hence, true parenthood—simply through its own existence.<sup>38</sup>

The film’s promotional poster is not the only way it engages with fetal citizenship or with reproductive politics more generally. The most obvious way it engages with Berlant’s idea of “turning women into children” is by rewriting the body of the pregnant woman from the novel to the film. As stated earlier, in the novel the only pregnant woman is Julian, a white, middle-class, married woman who does not realize she can become pregnant because she has been exempt from sterility testing for having a disability. When she has an affair with a priest named Luke, who is also exempt from sterility testing because he has epilepsy, she becomes pregnant. Like the novel, the film thematically plays with the idea that some bodies are more suitable for reproduction than others, and therefore more prone to government intervention and monitoring. However, it exchanges disability for race in the creation of Kee. Some critics have seen the creation of Kee’s character as revolutionary for this reason, and in a similar vein to Agamben’s celebration of the refugee as having subversive potential. Jonathon Romney, for instance, notes that the fact that Kee is a black refugee who gives birth to a baby girl, rather than a white woman who is impregnated by a priest and gives birth to a baby boy, means that Kee and her daughter can be seen as radical.<sup>39</sup> He sees a “delightful irony,” as he puts it, in the fact that the film opened in America on Christmas Day 2006, in that the film’s message is a nativity story with a twist, since it posits the next Messiah is an African baby girl.<sup>40</sup> This idea is backed by Cuarón himself, who has stated in interviews that his decision to have Kee’s character be a refugee was intentional “and has to do with the fact that humanity started in Africa.”<sup>41</sup> While the argument that Kee is a radical change has merit in that the film makes the next generation not only African but stateless, it is an oversimplification to argue that Kee is subversive simply because she is a refugee. In fact, the way her character is *scripted*, and her pregnant body is fetishized, she often comes close to a stereotypical Virgin Mary, full of milk and honey but lacking agency and voice, and this undermines her subversive potential.



Figure 2. Kee (Claire-Hope Ashitey) reveals her pregnancy to Theo (Clive Owen) in a barn, in *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2006). Copyright Universal Pictures

In “(Re)Conceiving the Surrogate: Maternity, Race, and Reproductive Technologies in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men*,” Sayantani DasGupta also argues that Kee lacks subjectivity.<sup>42</sup> According to DasGupta, the film’s splitting of James’s character Julian into two separate protagonists enacts “a separation of female sexual and maternal desires” that leaves Kee with little agency. Kee’s lack of sexual appeal or desire, her missing back story, family, friends, and history, and the way she is infantilized by parental figures in the film contribute to this lack of subjectivity. As DasGupta argues, “Kee, whose name itself suggests an object status (a key) rather than subject hood,” is without “context or history.” In contrast to the active role given to the pregnant Julian by James, for example, the film reduces Kee “almost entirely to her reproductive and symbolic role: she does not act but is acted upon.” She therefore fulfills a reproductive role in the film that DasGupta argues “enacts the same sort of discursive violence against Third World women that [the film] critiques on a wider scale” through her characterization as a vulnerable and often mute black woman in need of parenting and protection by Theo and Julian, a white couple.<sup>43</sup>

Kee’s lack of agency is revealed in several scenes in the film, most notably when she reveals to Theo that she is pregnant by taking off her clothes and showing him her enlarged belly and breasts (see fig. 2). Set in a

manger as cathedral music swells in the background, the scene has obvious biblical allusions. Instead of telling Theo she is pregnant, Kee undresses and reveals herself in a way that fetishizes her body for both Theo and the viewer. As the camera moves from Theo's astonished face to Kee's naked form she is both animalized and naturalized like the swollen cattle around her as her body is turned into a spectacle.<sup>44</sup> When the other Fishes burst into the barn and protest Kee's willingness to include Theo in her secret pregnancy, Kee stands mute as Luke and Miriam, Kee's midwife, argue on Kee's behalf, with Miriam stating that Kee has "the right" to show Theo her body. Portrayed here, as DasGupta describes her, as "all fertility, 'savage' simplicity, bestiality, and childlike trust," Kee is passively reduced to her pregnant body in this scene as it is put on display for both Theo and the viewer and assumed to speak for itself.<sup>45</sup>

Miriam's assertion of Kee's rights poses an interesting dilemma, as the film makes it clear that the only right choice for Kee is for her to be happy about her pregnancy. This is opposed to the novel, which questions what the cost will be to both mother and child if Julian's baby turns out to be an accident and the only child born. No one in the film ever brings up a similar concern, and Theo's close friend Jasper sums up the film's take on the pregnancy perfectly when he tells Kee, "Your baby is the miracle the whole world has been waiting for." Even Kee, whom one might assume could be terrified by her situation, is full of determination. In the only scene in which she talks about feeling ambivalent about her pregnancy (and in one of the only scenes where she has any extended speech), Kee admits she thought of using a suicide pill when she first realized she was pregnant. However, she ends up stating that it is through her pregnancy that she has become truly alive. She states, "Then the baby kicked. I feel it. Little bastard was alive, and I feel it. And me, too. I am alive." Here, Kee espouses traditional rhetoric that suggests women truly fulfill their destinies as women through pregnancy and motherhood. Of course in the context of the film this kicking *is* a miracle moment and Kee truly is alive in the most poignant way, but the film's extreme context effaces the other factors that might normally make this pregnancy more ambivalent.

It is easy for viewers to forget that Kee is a young, poor, and homeless refugee who lacks any family, and in any other context her pregnancy might take on a multitude of significations including, but certainly not limited to, self-realization. Further, this is a Hollywood film aimed at an American audience, and as Rickie Solinger notes in *Pregnancy and Power*, it is important to remember that any discussion of reproduction in America is always also about race, as "the systematic, institutionalized denial of reproductive freedom has uniquely marked Black women's history in America."<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Kee's story of how she realizes that she is truly alive through her pregnancy should also be contextualized within

a history of biopolitical and reproductive racism that has often refused black, native, and poor women the right “to decide when and whether to become pregnant, to stay pregnant, to have abortions, to become mothers, and to keep and raise their children.”<sup>47</sup> Miriam’s comment in the barn that it is “Kee’s right” is a loaded one, then, as Kee’s reproductive rights are framed within the film by way of mostly mute complacency. Romney may be correct that it is subversive to have a black woman in this role, but this subversion is undercut by how the film naturalizes Kee’s embracement of her situation.

The effect of this effacement is that Kee is reduced to her reproductive function in the film, while the fetus, and by extension the child, comes to represent the natural inspiration, if not the solution, to a world of terrorism, despair, and fascism. This naturalization, in turn, leads to an embracement of Edelman’s “reproductive futurism.”<sup>48</sup> In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman argues that reproductive futurism is the process by which the image of the Child (which he always capitalizes to distinguish from the experience of an actual child) comes to represent the very notion or idea of the future itself. Reproductive futurism relies on the fantasy that we may somehow return to our own innocence or childhood, to a time-that-never-quite-was, through constant attempts to protect our future world and our future children. Edelman is working within a Lacanian framework by claiming that the image of the Child functions as a necessary part of the symbolic because it works as a political fantasy by screening out the temporality of our own lives and the fragility of our own egos; it screens out the death drive.<sup>49</sup> He argues that reproductive futurism is connected to the death drive in two ways: first, in how the image of the Child enacts a logic of repetition that helps fix our identities as we identify with the future of the social order; and second, in how the image of the queer (which can be any number of queer figures for Edelman, including gay men and women, feminists, and those in favor of abortion) “comes to embody that order’s traumatic encounter with its own failure, its encounter with the illusion of the future as suture to bind the constitutive wound of the subject’s subjection to the signifier, which divides it, paradoxically, both from and into itself.”<sup>50</sup>

In other words, if we are always focusing on protecting our future generations rather than facing our own mortality, we are given the illusion that our lives have purpose, order, and form so long as we can ensure that those future generations will exist. The fantasy of futurity therefore “assures the stability of our identities as subjects” and ensures coherence to “the Imaginary totalizations through which those identities appear to us in recognizable form.” In this way the image of the Child, much like the fetal citizen, is put in the position in which not only does it represent “the telos of the social order,” but it is also seen “as the one for whom that order

is held in perpetual trust.” As Edelman explains, this leads to a situation in which the “figural Child alone embodies the citizen as ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation’s good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights ‘real’ citizens are allowed.” This is how it can make sense politically, for instance, to deny health-care benefits to queer couples (who actually once were children) in the name of future Children who are imagined to be safe only through ensuring the “sanctity” of heterosexual marriage and reproduction (i.e., futurity). Whatever appears as a threat to this mandate of the collective reproduction of the Child is a threat “not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to the social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of the futurism on which meaning always depends.” The Child that does not exist yet is part of the logic of futurity upon which symbolic meaning is built.<sup>51</sup>

The film engages with reproductive futurism in its fetishism of childhood, which is revealed most obviously in how the world hysterically grieves when Baby Diego is murdered, and how he is still referred to as “Baby” when he is eighteen years old. It is also revealed in how Kee’s future child is idealized while Kee’s health and well-being are completely disregarded. Consider that neither Kee nor any of the other characters is concerned about what might happen to her and her body once she makes it to the Human Project, although she will undoubtedly undergo a huge array of medical tests, including the potential harvesting of her eggs. Or that the Fishes, the very group who is supposed to shelter Kee, view her only as a container or a vessel, easily disposable once they get their hands on her child, which is in turn referred to as “the flag that could unite us all” and seen as a potential weapon against the state. As Edelman argues, the Child who does not yet exist represents *the* one figure that is always worth fighting for politically and worth protecting legally, and this is why the focus on Kee’s future child over her own well-being makes narrative sense. Kee’s reproductive function in the film is to facilitate futurity; it therefore matters little what she thinks or has to say, or what happens to her, as the focus is her future child and futurity itself.

For Edelman, the end result of reproductive futurism is that heterosexual reproduction comes to represent the future itself, and queerness is figured as the “unfuture” or limit of our political system — as death itself. The image of the Child becomes privileged as the embodiment of all that is “good” about heterosexuality; it is used to place “an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity.”<sup>52</sup> This helps explain why the “fantasy of the nuclear family is still the centerpiece of our cultural imagination” — something else that is clearly seen in the film.<sup>53</sup> For instance, it is Julian and Theo’s love story and history, including the loss of their beloved child, Dylan, that is



Figure 3. Julian (Julianne Moore), Dylan (baby), and Theo (Clive Owen) in *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2006). Copyright Universal Pictures

the true backbone of the plot: a history that does not exist in the novel but takes up a considerable amount of screen time (see fig. 3). As DasGupta argues, Theo and Julian are in many ways the film’s “true parents,” acting like intended parents awaiting their surrogate’s delivery date as they hover over Kee, an idea reinforced by Kee’s decision to name her baby Dylan in the last moments of the film as Theo dies. DasGupta argues that in this naming, the idea of “the white, happy, heterosexual family unit is saved, as the (live) Black female child is symbolically transformed into the (dead) White male one.”<sup>54</sup> The film comes full circle, bringing Dylan, and symbolic meaning, back to life and fulfilling Edelman’s definition of reproductive futurism as a push toward “generational succession, temporality and narrative sequence, not toward the end of enabling change, but, instead, of perpetuating sameness, of turning back time to assure repetition.”<sup>55</sup>

In metaphorically recreating the lost heterosexual family, the film ensures the generational succession that Edelman figures as the very structure of symbolic meaning. That is why it is possible for the film to make sense, although it ends before we see if Kee actually makes it to the Human Project. As Cuarón himself states, it does not matter what happens next, or that Theo dies before “seeing the Promised Land,” because “he doesn’t need to see the Promised Land. He recovered what he was looking

for which was his sense of hope. And as long as you have that sense of hope, then you do not need confirmation of things.”<sup>56</sup> Through the story line’s reproductive futurism, the film accesses a nostalgia for the future that creates its own fulfillment, as futurity, hope, and the sanctity of heterosexual reproduction are reinstated.

### **Bio-Reproductive Conclusions**

Edelman figures the queer in ways that are akin to Agamben’s homo sacer in that they both represent the limits of the social order. Like Agamben, Edelman sees his figure as having subversive potential. He argues that “by figuring a refusal of the coercive belief in the paramount value of futurity, while refusing as well any backdoor hope for dialectical access to meaning, the queer dispossess the social of the ground on which it rests.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Agamben postulates that it is only the refugee who can “clear the way for a long-overdue renewal of categories in the service of a politics in which bare life is no longer separated and excepted, either in the state order or in the figure of human rights.”<sup>58</sup> The reproductive body, however, complicates the subversive potential of either of these liminal figures by highlighting the contradictory ways in which symbolic meaning is upheld in relation to state and judicial power. If Edelman is right, and “we are no more able to conceive of a politics without the fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child,” then the reproductive body is a key element of any theory on the limits of citizenship, even one that is against futurism.<sup>59</sup> *Children of Men* highlights this by revealing the important role that the image of the fetus or future child plays in the creation of symbolic and narrative meaning in a film that critiques the politics of bare life; it is *only* through Kee’s ability to carry the “super-person” or “unborn citizen” that Berlant speaks of, and to facilitate the reproductive futurism that Edelman argues is fundamental to all narrative, that Kee is able to access any type of political agency. And then, this political life is still facilitated through characters like Julian and Theo, who represent full inclusion in the nation-state even when they are fighting against its rules. The film therefore offers a striking example of how reproductive futurism and homo sacer, the fetus and the refugee, relate to conversations about reproductive politics and citizenship rights by highlighting the paradoxes of a political climate focused on the regulation of who or what is considered “alive” by simultaneously deeming others politically dead.

In similar ways, Edelman and Agamben argue that the conditions to decide who does and does not count as living are included in the mechanisms and calculations of state power, so some people’s lives can easily cease to be eligible for basic, if not human, rights (the queer, the refugee),

while others can become increasingly regulated under the guise of human rights (the pregnant woman). Within this divide, bare life “comes to be displaced from strictly political motivations and areas to a more ambiguous terrain in which the physician and the sovereign seem to exchange roles.”<sup>60</sup> I have argued that it is in this exchange that we find the current status of the fetus, since now that ultrasound technologies are used to redefine life before the moment of birth, and the fetus has become “visible” to an unprecedented degree, the fetus now represents another limit-concept of bare life — one that seems to need constant regulation and legal redefinition. Fetal citizenship occupies a special position biopolitically, one that is akin to how the refugee functions — just on the other end of the political spectrum. For instance, the constant push by the medical establishment to improve ultrasound technologies and fetal monitoring techniques reveals just how invested sovereign powers are in the scientific redefinitions of who or what is and is not considered “living.” These investments reveal that much of “the struggle over the worth of different types of human lives takes place through medicalized, gendered, and racialized discourses about health, vigor, and the civility of the body.”<sup>61</sup> There really is no “life” prior to the state’s deciding upon categories that render life into existence. The film shows us this by overlapping fetal citizenship with the refugee in a way that highlights how it is often on the level of reproductive policy that bare life takes on its gendered and racialized dimensions, especially in the management of who or what is called a fetus, a baby, a person, a mother, or a citizen.

## Notes

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1. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

2. Mathew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli, eds., *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron, and Alex Murray, eds., *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009); Andrew Norris, ed., *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and Alison Ross, ed., “The Agamben Effect,” special issue, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107 (2008).

3. Penelope Deutscher, “The Inversion of Exceptionality: Foucault, Agamben, and ‘Reproductive Rights,’” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107 (2008): 55–70; Catherine Mills, “Agamben’s Messianic Politics: Biopolitics, Abandonment, and Happy Life,”

*Contretemps* 5 (2004): 42–62; Geraldine Pratt, “Abandoned Women and Spaces of Exception,” *Antipode* (2005): 1052–78; Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, “Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107 (2008): 89–106.

4. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 83.

5. P. D. James, *The Children of Men* (New York: Warner, 1992).

6. For more on how the film relates to 9/11, see Matt Brennan, “What a Waste: The Apocalyptic Prophecies of T. S. Eliot and Alfonso Cuarón,” *Bright Lights Film Journal* 57 (2007), [www.brightlightsfilm.com/57/apocalypse.php](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/57/apocalypse.php); and Richard von Busack, “Making the Future” (interview with Alfonso Cuarón), *Metroactive*, 10–16 January 2007, [www.metroactive.com/metro/01.10.07/alfonso-cuaron-0702.html](http://www.metroactive.com/metro/01.10.07/alfonso-cuaron-0702.html).

7. In the novel it is a married political activist who does not realize she could become pregnant until she has an affair with a priest named Luke. This story line changes greatly in the film, as Julian becomes Theo’s former lover, an American ex-pat, and the leader of the Fishes, and Luke becomes a (black) Judas character who treacherously arranges Julian’s murder in order to gain control of Kee’s future child.

8. Lauren Berlant, “America, ‘Fat,’ the Fetus,” *boundary 2* 21 (1994): 145–95; Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

9. Garth Franklin, “Interview: Alfonso Cuarón for *Children of Men*,” *Dark Horizons*, 25 December 2006, [www.darkhorizons.com/interviews/253/alfonso-cuaron-for-children-of-men-](http://www.darkhorizons.com/interviews/253/alfonso-cuaron-for-children-of-men-)

10. Sheila Roberts, “Alfonso Cuarón Interview, Director of *Children of Men*,” *Movies Online*, 19 December 2006, [www.moviesonline.ca/movienews\\_10790.html](http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_10790.html).

11. Slavoj Žižek, “*Children of Men* Comments,” *Children of Men*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón (Hollywood: Universal Pictures, 2006; DVD, 2007).

12. *Ibid.*

13. E. Ann Kaplan, “Futuristic Dystopian/Utopian Discourses in Film: Or Trauma Future-Tense (with Reference to Cuarón’s *Children of Men*)” (paper presented at the annual conference for the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Los Angeles, 17–21 March 2010).

14. Slavoj Žižek, “The Clash of Civilizations at the End of History.” See [www.scribd.com/doc/19133296/Zizek-The-Clash-of-Civilizations-at-the-End-of-History](http://www.scribd.com/doc/19133296/Zizek-The-Clash-of-Civilizations-at-the-End-of-History) (accessed 10 May 2011).

15. See also Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

16. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 4.

17. *Ibid.*, 1, 9.

18. *Ibid.*, 26, 11, 115.

19. Mills, “Agamben’s Messianic Politics,” 47.

20. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on 11 September and Related Dates* (New York: Verso, 2002), 95.

21. Lisa L. Diedrich, “What Is the Time of Medicine? Two Mediatized Medical Events, circa 2005” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association, Harvard University, 26–29 March 2009). Žižek also references Terri Schiavo in “Clash of Civilizations.”

22. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 134.

23. Pratt, “Abandoned Women,” 1057.

24. *Ibid.*, 1055, 1056.

25. See, among others, Valerie Hartouni, *Cultural Conceptions: On Reproduc-*

*tive Technologies and the Remaking of Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Dorothy Roberts, "Punishing Drug Addicts Who Have Babies," in *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950–2000*, ed. Rickie Solinger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 124–56; and Rachel Roth, *Making Women Pay: The Hidden Cost of Fetal Rights* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

26. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2010), 16.

27. Deutscher, "Inversion of Exceptionality," 59.

28. *Ibid.*, 64, 59, 61, 62.

29. *Ibid.*, 66.

30. Use of the term *pro-life* is purposeful here to reveal the important dimensions of "the politics of life" to reproductive politics. Compared to the term *anti-abortion*, for instance, which implies only a negative stance, *pro-life* suggests that one can, and should, always make the positive choice about life. Further, the term is more useful as it covers a range of topics as well as abortion, including an opposition to euthanasia, to stem-cell research, and to cloning. For more on the connections between the politics of life and biopolitics, see Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

31. James, *Children*, 96.

32. Edelman, *No Future*, 13.

33. I was unable to obtain the rights to include a copy of this image here. It can be viewed at [www.imdb.com/media/rm3042349568/tt0206634](http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3042349568/tt0206634) (accessed 30 March 2011).

34. Lauren Berlant, "America"; Donna J. Haraway, *Modest Witness @ Second Millennium: Femaleman Meets OncoMouse* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Valerie Hartouni, *Cultural Conceptions: On Reproductive Technologies and the Remaking of Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

35. Karyn Valerius, "Rosemary's Baby, Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects," *College Literature* 32 (2005): 129.

36. Hartouni, *Cultural Conceptions*, 6.

37. Berlant, "America," 147.

38. *Ibid.*, 146, 150, 156.

39. Jonathon Romney, "Green and Pleasant Land," *Film Comment* 43 (2007): 34–35.

40. *Ibid.*, 35.

41. Franklin, "Interview: Alfonso Cuarón."

42. Sayantani DasGupta, "(Re)Conceiving the Surrogate: Maternity, Race, and Reproductive Technologies in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," in *Prescribing Gender in Medicine and Narrative*, ed. Marcelline Block and Angela Laflen (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010): 178–211.

43. *Ibid.*, 186, 187, 179.

44. *Ibid.*, 188; DasGupta compares her to the Hottentot Venus in this scene.

45. *Ibid.*, 188.

46. Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 132.

47. Rickie Solinger, "Introduction: Abortion Politics and History," in *Abortion Wars*, 8.

48. Edelman, *No Future*, 2.

49. For Lacan, the death drive stems from a loss of harmony in the pre-oedipal fusion with the mother's breast. The trauma of this loss of unity turns into an urge

for repetition and a compulsion to relive the original disturbance that this separation entails. The death drive is therefore a kind of compulsion whereby we attain a painful satisfaction through repetition and failure.

50. Edelman, *No Future*, 26.

51. *Ibid.*, 7, 11.

52. *Ibid.*, 2.

53. Kelly Oliver, *Family Values: Subjects between Nature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), xvii.

54. DasGupta, "(Re)Conceiving," 195.

55. Edelman, *No Future*, 60.

56. Roberts, "Alfonso Cuarón Interview."

57. Edelman, *No Future*, 6.

58. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 134.

59. Edelman, *No Future*, 11.

60. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 143.

61. Pratt, "Abandoned Women," 1054.

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