Mimi Sheller. Closing Remarks. Reproductive Mobilities workshop. August 10, 2018. UBCO.

First, I just want to say I’m really happy to be part of this conversation, this workshop. It’s really an exciting time to be thinking about reproduction and mobilities together. There’s so many changing practices, technologies, social arrangements, politics around this intersection of reproduction and mobilities. It’s a crucial topic for our times. And I’m really happy that you guys are pulling together what are quite different, disparate, topics and approaches within that wider rubric. I find that really promising as a direction to take this in.

As a scholar of mobilities, I haven’t really worked on reproduction at all, I thought my role here would be to reflect the ways in which mobilities theory can contribute to your work on reproduction. But also, what your studies of reproduction bring to mobilities research and theorizing mobilities.

One thing that first leapt out at me upon reading the papers, was thinking first about conception and pregnancy itself as a kind of mobility of the body, a mobilizing of the body, at the sort of molecular, cellular, powers of reproductive bodies. Which when moved outside the body into artificial means of reproduction, or let’s say outside the singular existing body to artificial assisted reproduction, mobilizes many other bodies and actors and potentialities, as you have all shown us in your work.

In one sense, the topics have been focusing on mobilities in terms of spatial displacement from one place to another; geographical mobility, crossing borders, moving things around as part of the process of reproduction. But as I noted in my opening remarks yesterday, some of the papers also engage in this other sense of mobility, as what Sue Frohlick described as waves, or energy, or vibes. I want to focus in on that and thinking about what Sue described as “powerful forces of transmission between diverse social actors, things, and energies, vibes, that connect with one another, and move a woman on a course of reproduction as one potentiality among many.” I think that moving someone on a course of reproductive potentiality, is not just a woman that moves on that course of potentiality, but intended parents, biological substances, medical practices. They’re all moving on some kind of course of reproduction and potentiality.

Sue also writes that she was aiming to think through how tourism “mobility generates reproductive trajectories, that is how being in another place sets in motion a set of unanticipated events that spark possibilities for any number of actions and outcomes related to human reproduction.” I want to try to connect this idea these trajectories, of setting things in motion, to some recent directions in critical mobilities theory, that have begun to highlight what are called process philosophies, or more like relational philosophies, what is sometimes called relational ontologies. I think there’s an interesting overlay of what you’re saying about reproductive potentialities and different ways of theorizing mobilities in this turn towards process philosophy.

There is a new article, by a historical geographer named Peter Merriman. He has a new article in *Society and Space*. Its title is “Molar and Molecular Mobilities.” He examines he says “the processes through which movements emerge and are rendered perceptible or imperceptible, building upon the writings of geographers, mobility scholars, and philosophers, who have sought to overcome or efface the binary of mobility stasis.” Mobility versus stasis. “Without flattening differences or overlooking questions of the political.” His mission is that a lot of research that tries to look politically at mobility, the politics of mobility, talks about mobility versus immobility. Mobility versus stillness. There’s one and then there’s the other. He is trying to get at this philosophical turn that tries to overcome that binary, mobility versus stasis, but still maintains and sense of the political. He draws on Jules Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s work, I think mainly in *Anti-Oedipus* but maybe some of their other texts also, where they make a distinction between molar and molecular movements.

I have to say, I’m not crazy about those words, and when I first read them, I was like “molar?” Teeth? I don’t know. And molecular, they’re not using it the way biologists use molecular, so I’m not crazy about the words, but it’s the ideas I want to get at.

Molar and molecular movements are a way of beginning to think about what Merriman calls “the unfolding of the world and the becoming of events.” It’s suggestive of more imperceptible kinds of mobility, but ones that are very close to the kinds of reproductive mobilities that we’ve been talking about, not only in Sue’s work but I think also in some of the other questions that hover around futurity, and egg freezing, surrogacy, IVF. Kind of this question of what will come into being? What futures or potentials are being held open and kept possible by mobilizing certain of reproductive materialities? I think that’s where there is this sort of interesting interplay here with this other sense of mobilities.

In my opening remarks I asked “what happens if we conceive of mobilities, not in terms of geographical or vectoral movement, from point A to point B, but in this more kind of imperceptible, molecular way? Are there some sort of what you might call vital-ist mobilities involved in conception and pregnancy, and artificial reproduction, in family formation, and kin-making? How are these being reshaped by the kind of transnational, geographical mobilities of ART and artificial reproduction? How does the transnational, geographical mobility intersect with the growing energetic mobilities of biological materials and bodies, and future imaginaries of the future?

Merriman writes “on one hand molar masses or bodies are punctual, highly organized, easily represented and expressed, and are perceived as clearly demarcated and bounded assemblages, or aggregates, that are frequently aligned with state and non-state actors.” That’s his version of what Deleuze and Guattari say about molar masses. They are these kind of objects, these entities, quantifiable, countable, controlled by the state, visible, perceptible, representable. And they kind of correspond with the body of the individual, the subject, the citizen, the masculine, kind of often white, liberal, heteronormative subject. Could be seen as a kind of classic molar mess.

I think that comes up in some of your papers. I’ve written this with last names, so I’m going to use your last names. As Latimer notes, I quote, “It is often on the level of reproduction that politics takes on gendered, heteronormative and racialized dimensions. This is because reproduction, both biological and social is fundamental to nationalist practice, process and politics, and to how we imagine the reproducibility of our communities, and reproduction therefore becomes a special site or target of state control.” And that’s a description of this kind of molar mobility, which is this control both at the level of the body and our communities and the state as this bounded entity, the making of borders and boundaries and singularities of a sort.

State mobility regimes, you can say, at the border and in other ways, control of citizenship, control of who moves and who reproduces, become an exercise in molar mobility, controlling and bounding bodies. In particular, unruly bodies and female bodies. We see this especially, I think, in things like the Indian State’s control of who can access artificial reproductive technologies, as you described, and it suggests efforts to demarcate the national body as a sort of bounded aggregate through the control of reproduction.

But also, I think we see it in things like what Andrea Whitaker described as this segmentation of productive processes, where there’s this kind of fragmentation into these different segments of bounded assemblages, which can then be moved around, re-aggregated, controlled, and thus commodified. Again, that kind of capitalist, commercial commodification of reproduction is also a kind of molar mobility and uses that molar mobility just as them state uses it for control and governance, the industries use it for commodification and profit.

In contrast to that, what are molecular movements? Yes, molecules move around, that’s part of it. But molecular movements described by Delueze and Guattari are these vital, incessant, and unruly mobilities, operating below the threshold of perception, and associated with becomings of innumerable kinds [possibly quoted]. I think of this as a kind of vitality and an unruliness that corresponds with classic western philosophical notions of the feminine. Of blackness. Of the subaltern. All of these unruly and incessant kind of uncontrolled, fluid, moving entities. And they are laden with these becomings of innumerable kinds.

What could be more representative of that than the pregnant body? And beyond that, the fragile assemblage of technologically assisted moving eggs, sperm, gametes, surrogates, potential parents, embryologists, and all those moving parts found in your kind of studies in this workshop. These kind of molecular mobilities, and in what ways do they exceed the control of molar power, with its expectations of individual, bounded, quantifiable entities? I think of Luce Iraguary talking about the female body as more than one. This body that is not one. It’s multiple. It’s two. It’s both. It’s something else.

What if reproductive mobilities are more like these molecular becomings? A minoritarian and future potential that undermines the molar imaginaries of the state, and can, as Deleuze and Guattari say, potentially thwart and break through the world-wide organization. Is there something queer about them? A kind of queering of reproduction. What if both pregnant bodies and assisted reproductive technological assemblages are different kinds of mobile bodies? Ones that can give rise to what another geographer, David Bissel, calls “moment to moment transitions in power that give rise to difference.” Of course, any such moment to moment transitions, including those of reproduction are always entangled with molar power, with state imaginaries of organization and capitalist organization. That’s partly why I referred earlier to the reproduction of reproduction, because it is constantly being pulled back into state projects, capitalist projects, nation building projects, racial formation projects. But it is still in tension with them. There’s something uncontrollable there. Something that exceeds those projects.

Merriman argues that “a focus on molecular and minor political movements and affects refocuses attention on the imperceptible proto-political forces and movements, which are inseparable from and irreducible to forces and movements performed by bodies aligned with perceptible molar, political collectives.” That’s a mouthful. So, there’s what we think of as perceptible politics, like “okay we’re going to organize, we’re going to protest, we’re going to march, we’re going to have a political party, we’re going to engage as political subjects in some kind of claim making,” but he is drawing on Massumi, to talk about these imperceptible proto-political forces. Something below the ground, below perception, below that kind of organized movement. And Bissel also draws on these kinds of approaches to, as he says, “expand our understanding of what constitutes our mobility politics.” So, we could say what constitutes mobility politics and reproductive politics. Is it always perceptible, or these imperceptible politics that’s happening? It could force us to expand our understanding of reproductive politics and mobilities, and I’d say some of your papers already push in that direction.

Lozanski’s observation that, quote “the capacity to reproduce which inheres in pregnant birth tourists does not only lead to the production of unchosen citizens, but also demonstrates the ways in which reproduction can be wielded against the will of the nation and its citizens, rather than in their service.” Already, this idea that birth tourism is in some sense some proto-political push against the power of the state to define citizenship. The capacity to reproduce can perhaps be turned against the sort of dominant patriarchal, white supremacist, heteronormative notions of controlled reproduction, especially in the white colonial settler state.

We talked about abortion being though of also as a kind of proto-political force. What are the politics around abortion? When does travelling for abortion, seeking an abortion, getting an abortion, become political? I mean it’s always political, but what kinds of politics does enact? And I think we can also think about Jamie’s paper on indigenous doulas and birthing in place as proto-political, and pushing against the white colonial settler state and its assumptions and systems for organizing reproduction.

So, these approaches, argues Merriman, “push us to understanding the relational and often imperceptible political entanglements, cross-cutting heterogeneous bodies, which have a differential capacity for affecting and being affected, moving and being moved. Bodies in this Deleuzian and Spinozian sense,” he writes, “are not reduced to sovereign monatic human subjects, bodies, or actors. Rather they are approached as kinetic and dynamic entities composed of relations, of motion and rest, of speed and slowness, and a capacity to effect and be effected.” So, that’s to me a really nice, different way of thinking about what is happening when we think about reproductive mobilities. All bodies are relational, kinetic, dynamic entities, bundles of potentialities, whether they move or not, whether they reproduce or not. The still body and the non-reproductive body is also a mobile body, in this idea because it is changing or blurring distinction between mobility and immobility.

But, as you probably have noticed, much of the work in this vein is still couched in a very male theoretical tradition. I’ve cited a bunch of white male European theorists. None of them have really taken on board feminist queer and post-colonial theoretical work. So, I think this space of thinking about that could be a really important time to do that. To think about how can we push forward a critical vision of reproductive mobilities that is attuned with, to use of the words that is used in process philosophy, attuned with processed philosophies but uses a much more feminist and post-colonial, critical lens?

So, what do the kinds of heterogenous mobile bodies and agencies addressed in all of your papers tell us about the imperceptible political entanglements that are at play here? How and by whom are different elements of biological life imagined as kinetic entities and put into relations of motion and rest, speed and slowness, as they reach towards reproductive potentialities and narrative plotlines of reproductive imaginaries? That’s one way to think about it. I think your papers bring up different dimensions of thinking about this. What are the varied capacities for moving and being moved of differential and heterogenous mobile bodies? And by bodies I mean not just human bodies but these other kind of assembled bodies of technology that feed into reproduction. How can we move beyond this kind of monatic sovereign subject to interrogate the kinds of partial or plural subjects moving through these reproductive networks that you’ve been describing? It’s kind of to shake us out of thinking “Okay, reproductive mobilities is about stories of individual people who move for reproduction.” It’s way more than that, and I think your work is showing that it’s way more than that, although that’s part of it too.

I think mobilities theory offers some useful theoretical and methodological perspectives for getting at some of these issues. I go back to my late colleague John Urry’s initial theorization of mobilities as encompassing not only physical mobility but also virtual mobility, imaginative mobility, communicational mobility. So mobilities theory has always been plural in that sense of different kinds of mobilities. We also in introducing the journal of *Mobilities*, we wrote with Kevin Hannam a piece called “Mobilities, Immobilities, and Moorings,” and I think all of your work shows really interesting shifting combinations and assemblages of what is moored and what is unmoored. Because all mobilities require some sort of infrastructural moorings of different kinds. When I think about what your write about, say extracting eggs and freezing them and making them mobile, there is a whole set of technologies mooring that enable that mobility. Or when I think about the agents and facilitators who make surrogates mobile, again there’s this infrastructure of the agencies and the hotels and the travel bookings that makes surrogates mobile. The temporary mobilities of everyone involved. I loved that image of the FIFO workers, fly-in fly-out doctors and embryologists involved in this process of extraction. Also, there’s a mooring of legal and regulatory environments which is changing. It’s a changing regulatory and legal environment, but people need to attach the mobilities of these processes to those moorings even as the moorings are moving to make the whole thing work.

I think we could also think about the importance of place that has come up in some of the papers, from birthing in place to Costa Rica as a special place and the way in which those are kind of moorings of nature, of land, of belonging in different ways. But also, in the negative sense of kind of weight of ethno-nationalist kinds of claims of belonging and mooring of reproduction in particular bodies and particular places. I think all of your work touches on that.

In much mobilities research recently more phenomenological perspective, which considers how bodies and spaces are co-constituted through on-going practices. I think that is also here in this work, this idea of sensations, affects, intensities, and imaginative sort of virtual mobilities all suggest this kind of entanglement of proximity and distance, of absence and presence. The mobilities perspective opens up the possibility of thinking about these kinds of spatial, sensory, and temporal dimensions. And even also it’s brought in kind of creative modes of writing and drawing on personal stories, on artistic representations. A lot of mobilities research has recently been trying to look at the arts and expressive genres as a way to think through these more affective and phenomenological dimensions.

I think your papers have been helping to sort of think about these interconnections across scales reproduction. I wanted to also comment on this idea of this mixing of scale and recombination of scales. How do reproductive mobilities recombine the scales of the microscopic, the bodily, the familial, and the national? I would say that you’ve shown in the work what I call prototypes of embryo formation, of pregnancy, of gestation, of birth, and even of abortion, with these sorts of timeframes. The temporality of that has come up in terms of manipulating temporalities. Egg-freezing is one manipulation of temporality, so-called “delayed” becoming a parent, “delayed” as another kind of temporalities that is criticized, these kind of anticipatory temporalities, which have been present in a lot of the work. Tempos of when to get pregnant, when to travel, when to form a family. But I think there is also implicit another temporality to do with this kind of flexible fast capitalism. The shifting investment and the logistics of reproduction, the logistics of commodified, artificial reproduction, and how that moves around the world. I didn’t realize the extent to which that was going on, and I think that’s really eye-opening to look at these temporalities of the body and the biological temporalities in relation to these fast, capital temporalities. And the ways in which states try to control the meeting point of those temporalities through the securitization of the border, and travel, and citizenship.

I think there is a really nice section in Murray and Khan’s paper where you say “we challenge the gendered distinction between mobility and immobility, drawing particular attention to the imprecations of scale in relation to the immobilized body. From global constructions of the female fecund body and its association with national identities, to the ways in which immobilization produces resistant and alternative micro mobilities.” I think that really gets at these scalar shifts and these different temporalities. You write that “immobility here is therefore is not necessarily an absence of movement but the constraining of movement, in particular ways so that it is debilitated and impaired but corporeally and emotionally. The resistance of the governing of bodies through storytelling comes as an illumination of the interdependencies of mobilities as corporeal, communicative, and imaginative. Mobilized through the stories not only told but told in ways that become instrumental in social transformation.” And I love that because it continues to this idea of storytelling and narratives as also instruments of social transformation. We’ve seen in so many of the papers the ways in which stories are mobilized for political purposes, for repressive purposes, for regulatory purposes, but also stories can be mobilized for transformative purposes. This perspective on storytelling relates to this question of temporalities and how they’re being reconfigured by assisted reproduction with so many different implications, complications, intersectionality. Our understanding of that is inflected through the stories we tell, through social movements, through imaginares, which are socialized, gendered, classed, sexed, national, all those things. The other thing that is so important in this workshop is the attention to different national contexts, and different cultural contexts, different kinds of experiences, because they offer many different social meanings and stories around these shifting reproductive mobilities.

The other aspect of temporality I was interested in was Lozanski’s observation that “birth tourists violate the idea of a normatively moralized queue in which individuals are expected to wait patiently for the possibility to obtain Canadian citizenship.” I love this idea of the moralized queue. I found it fascinating temporality, the temporality of waiting. “Wait your turn, be polite.” It made me think about how teenagers are told to wait before having sex, young women are told to wait to get pregnant, and then young couples are told to hurry to get pregnant, and single women are told they must not wait too long. Eggs are waiting to be frozen, eggs are waiting to be thawed. There’s all these temporalities around waiting and what’s the right timing. All of this waiting around intersects with the moralized queues of national becoming and citizenship. Of things like population growth, and aging curves and waiting lines for visas, and at border crossings, and also waiting in refugee detention centers. Waiting to make asylum claims. All of this waiting is for me a key topic in reproductive justice and mobility justice. Where and how do they meet?

In this sense, I think the temporalities of reproductive mobilities are about two kinds of temporality. David Scott, who is the editor of *Small Acts*, which is a journal of Caribbean Studies, he has a discussion of temporality in his book *Omens of Adversity*, and he reminds us of this really important distinction in classical philosophy between chronos and kryos. Chronos is time as linear flow, like sand passing through an hourglass. That kind of time is passing, its going, chronos, chronological. But kyros was another meaning associated with time, meaning the right time, the time when something should happen. Or in some cases, stalled time, the time that was missed. More like the right timing, the chance. Reproductive mobilities and the stories around them are both about chronos, chronological time, but also crucially about time in the second sense of when is the right time, can time in a sense be slowed, and what happens when it is stalled, and it is not progressing. Pregnancy is not progressing; your dilation is not progressing. There’s all this sense of what’s the timing of this.

So, these combinations of chronos and kyros are very much about the stories we tell and the practices that we perform, or regulate, or encourage, or prohibit. Who decides what the right time is? I think Yu describes well the entanglement of physical mobilities and new reproductive technologies in these kinds of shifting desires and meanings. She writes that “the pragmatic decisions and dramatic predictions surrounding corporate sponsored and transnational egg freezing services are coping mechanisms in response to a world in motion. They reveal how the meanings of technology register movement in and across the world, as well as the ways in which mobility engenders social meaning. And it’s partly this intersection of people’s chronological life course with this kind of timing, and processes of egg freezing that kind of mediate between personal time and social time, and national sense of time.

In conclusion, I just want to kind of affirm that we can use mobilities theory to interrogate reproductive mobilities in ways that might offer many new insights into reproduction itself, as well as drawing on reproductive theories to gain new insights into mobilities. I think it is at this point of drawing on process theories and relational ontologies to think about the temporality and scales of multiple kinds of becoming and coming into the world that we can sort of think of these as processes of reproduction and reproductive mobilities as an important way of thinking about that process. We can think about the punctuated temporalities or reproduction and how these intersect with punctual mobilities of many different kinds. And above all, we can pay attention to the power relations and questions of reproductive justice and mobility justice that shape who or what can move or become, how such reproductive mobilities are determined, how they are imagined, how they are narrated, and who controls the technological practices, the legal regulation, the embodied performances, the representations, and stories of human reproduction. //