

Alexandra Vieux Frankel

**Queering Reproductive Time:  
Jacob's Wrestling and Queer Temporalities in  
Sheila Heti's *Motherhood***

## Abstract

*In her book Motherhood, Sheila Heti transforms her titular subject into a state of wrestling. She divorces motherhood from biological reproduction and expands it. The result is a version of motherhood oriented toward the past rather than reproductive futures. This article argues that Heti relies on queer tropes and the biblical story of Jacob wrestling to accomplish motherhood's transvaluation. Those tropes reproduce the antisocial theory of queerness popularized by Lee Edelman and position queerness as antithetical to reproductive futures. Jacob's wrestling, associated with the naming of a patriarch and Jewish futures, becomes a space for interrogating conventional definitions of motherhood. The concept's resignification contributes to current debates around Jewish continuity in North America by offering a more inclusive view of motherhood. This article shows how Heti's work draws attention to heteronormative foundations of continuity discourses and the question of recognizing queer futures.*

## Résumé

*Dans son livre Motherhood, Sheila Heti transforme son sujet en un état de lutte. Elle dissocie la maternité de la reproduction biologique et l'élargit. Le résultat est une version de la maternité orientée vers le passé plutôt que vers un avenir reproductif. Cet article soutient que Heti s'appuie sur des idées queers et sur l'histoire biblique de la lutte de Jacob pour accomplir la transvaluation de la maternité. Ces idées reproduisent la théorie antisociale de l'homosexualité popularisée par Lee Edelman et positionnent l'homosexualité comme antithétique des futurs reproductifs. La lutte de Jacob, associée à la désignation d'un patriarche et d'un avenir juif, devient un espace de remise en question des définitions conventionnelles de la maternité. La resignification du concept contribue aux débats actuels sur la continuité juive en Amérique du Nord. Offrir une vision plus inclusive de la maternité attire l'attention sur les fondements hétéronormatifs des discours sur la continuité et sur la question de la reconnaissance de la parenté queer.*

Sheila Heti's 2018 *Motherhood* is difficult to pin down. The book charts the struggle of an unnamed narrator to decide whether or not to have children. She had been uninterested in having children throughout her twenties and early thirties, but as she approaches her forties, she feels on the cusp of an irreversible choice. *Motherhood* is the product of that dilemma and the difficulty of coming to terms with not wanting children. Critics likewise struggle to determine the book's status as fiction or nonfiction, since the words "a novel" do not appear on the cover. Even as fiction, it is unclear whether the book is autofiction. The unnamed narrator bears a strong resemblance to Heti herself: both are the same age and based in Toronto. *Motherhood* has received critical acclaim for its feminist and unflinching interrogation of its titular subject.

Heti demonstrates “how hard it is for women to say they simply do not want children without feeling the need to justify it” (Freeman 2018) and highlights gendered dimensions of the question “of what makes a valuable, productive, and meaningful life” (Lucas 2018). Reviewers have criticized *Motherhood* for its narrow conceptualizations of gender, especially vis-à-vis configuring artistic creation and procreation as inherently irreconcilable (Freeman 2018; Schwartz 2018). Such binary oppositions abound within the text. The narrator claims to be ambivalent about children but has already decided that she does not want them. She deplores the reproductive futures of heteronormative time and craves a maternal identity. The book she produces embodies these painful deliberations, which she frames through the biblical Jacob’s wrestling, effectively collapsing the oppositions that saturate the book’s text and its reception.

For all the attention *Motherhood* has received for its feminist triumphs and shortcomings, focus on the book’s invocation of queer tropes is conspicuously absent. A yearning for queerness suffuses the text. This yearning is most palpably present in the narrator’s envy for what she perceives as queer exemptions from the heteronormative expectation of childbearing. The motherhood that Heti’s narrator imagines complicates heteronormative, linear temporalities that fly unperturbed into the future. I argue that *Motherhood* queers reproductive temporalities and, in doing so, challenges readers to imagine futurity beyond biological reproduction. Queerness and Jacob’s wrestling are central to this task. Heti capitalizes on the queer kernels within the story of Jacob’s wrestling in parashah *ṽayishlah* to change its subject from the crowning of a patriarch to a childless form of motherhood. She names this “wrestling place, Motherhood” (2018, 284). As such, Heti “takes an ostensibly refined and knowable concept—motherhood—and disaggregates it, making it curiouiser and thus open for resignification” (Belcourt 2020, 41). Jacob’s wrestling further serves as an anchor for Heti’s deliberations over how to respond to and live with the intergenerational trauma of the Holocaust. Parashah *ṽayishlah* then is not only subject to gender-bending but also raises the question of how to envision Jewish futures.

This essay thus contributes to the growing body of work on gender and sexuality in Jewish Studies. These works “rethink the boundaries of what has been termed ‘the Jewish community’ and ‘the Jewish family’” (Kranson 2020, 513) and remind us that “sexuality has never been a solely private issue” (Kranson 2020, 509). The essay’s first section provides an overview of *Motherhood*. I will then examine Heti’s invocation of Jacob’s wrestling. Heti uses this parashah to redefine motherhood as wrestling and caring for one’s mother. I use Lori Lefkowitz’s discussion of Jacob in drag to show how parashah *ṽayishlah* is already attuned to a re-gendering of Jacob (2002). Although invocations of Jacob’s wrestling are often associated with Jewish futurity, they can also complicate linear time. I draw on Idit Alphandary’s discussion of Jacob’s wrestling in twentieth-century post-World War II Jewish literature, where the wrestling

angel embodies Walter Benjamin's angel of history. This figure "projects hope" into the past (Alphandary 2008, 63) and is essential to *Motherhood's* queer temporalities. In the next section, I focus on the book's queer tropes, which offer oversimplified imaginations of queer life. Heti simultaneously invokes antisocial and social theories of queerness. Antisocial theories embrace a rejection of reproductive futures, while the contrasting approach defines queerness as futures yet to be realized. I return to these early twenty-first-century debates over the antisocial thesis to examine its workings and relationship to futurity within *Motherhood*. Just as wrestling collapses the distinction between binary opposites elsewhere in Heti's book, so too here does the angel of history prompt an otherwise unimaginable reconciliation of oppositions. Finally, I discuss how *Motherhood* intervenes in recent North American debates on continuity, where *Motherhood* falls short, and how the book offers radical opportunities for imagining more inclusive Jewish futures.

## Rewriting *Motherhood*

*Motherhood* is unconventional in form. It does not follow a traditional arc of a build-up to a climax followed by resolution. The narrative unfolds through the ethereal conversations that the narrator has with the coins she throws. Heti writes in a brief preface that she did actually throw coins while writing the book. With each question asked, she tossed three coins—a system loosely based on the I-Ching. At least two of the three coins landing heads up meant the answer was yes—heads down, and the answer was no. The conversations between Heti and the coins revolve around her question about having children. Alexandra Schwartz (2018) aptly describes these conversations as "ghostly, uncanny dialogues" in her review of *Motherhood* for the *New Yorker*.

On the one hand, the conversations with coins enable the narrator to "fashion a higher power," create a sense of connection with divinity, with which to converse (Schwartz 2018). Describing the answer to the question of wanting children as the "greatest secret her body keeps from her" (Heti 2018, 21), the narrator desires a clear answer and "command from the divine" (Schwartz 2018). The absence of this command turns the narrator toward the coins. On the other hand, the narrator's long-term boyfriend, who has a child from a previous relationship, tells the narrator that the decision to have a child is hers alone but that she should be sure. His refusal to engage with the narrator meaningfully leaves her to converse with the coins (Blair 2018). The narrator describes the coins as disrupting the complacency in her thinking. Indeed, the coins' answers compel the narrator "to think in new ways" (Kirsch 2018). These conversations are often cryptic, giving the narrator the sense that she is conversing with the universe. These cryptic conversations have a Talmudic quality, if only "the rabbis had been 30-something women eyeing their biological clocks" (Shulevitz 2022).

The narrator experiences each month that she menstruates with overwhelming consternation and despair. Not only does she experience the distressing and painful symptoms of premenstrual syndrome, but she also feels alienated from her menstruating body. Her body does not feel like her own. Although her body keeps the question of children a secret, she also resents it for continuing to menstruate, suggesting that the answer to the question is quite clear. The narrator experiences menstruation as incommensurate with her rejection of conventional motherhood: she is not at home in a body with reproductive potential. However, neither she nor her long-term boyfriend use contraception, leaving to chance the possibilities of pregnancy in much the same way that chance structures her conversations with the coins (Currie 2020). The narrator's menstruation and discussions with the coins create the sense that time passes. Although chapters read like journal entries, they contain no dates. And yet the narrator describes the book she undertakes as essentially about the soul of time. As Shulevitz suggests, in *Motherhood*, "maybe the menstrual cycle exists to manifest" the human body's entanglements with time (Shulevitz 2018; see also Lucas 2018). The reader learns that the narrator's dilemma about having children is further complicated by her many cis-women peers who have begun having babies. Although the narrator insists that another's decisions are not necessarily a criticism of one's own, she also laments how others' decisions can be experienced as threatening (Lucas 2018).

The narrator feels left behind and abandoned by the women she assumed would be her childless comrades. She is asked when she will "do her time" (Heti 2018, 34). The narrator is particularly concerned about the impact that raising children will have on her as an artist and writer. Her contemporaries who have had children confess to not having written. Miles reinforces this idea that one cannot be a parent and committed to one's art at the same time. The narrator takes on this view without protest or question—indeed, she has been primed for it by the dynamics within her own family (discussed below). However, the unproblematic reproduction of this dichotomy between professional fulfillment and motherhood constitutes a key feminist critique of the book. Here, the issue is not that motherhood and profession are incompatible but that Miles has demonstrated his lack of interest (Blair 2018; Freeman 2018). That is, the narrator is left isolated in her decision and, potentially, in the decision's outcome. For Blair, this weakness makes the book "seem, frustratingly, like a dispatch from a simple place" because, in the narrator's world, only singular definitions exist of mother and writer (2018).

The narrator's family history as Holocaust survivors deepens her anxiety and ambivalence about having children. This dimension of *Motherhood* has not received as much attention from reviewers (for exceptions, see Kirsch 2018 and Shulevitz 2022). The narrator's maternal grandmother, Magda, survived the concentration camps and attended law school. At the same time that she was completing her studies, her

husband was caught smuggling sweaters between Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and the law school prohibited her from graduating. The narrator explains, "After that, she helped her husband with the business forever, but she was unhappy with her fate.... She insisted my mother become a professional woman; wanted her to get a good education, make something of her life, since Magda could not" (Heti 2018, 71). The narrator's mother completed medical school in Hungary, propelled by her own mother's insistence on professional achievement. Upon marrying the narrator's father, whose parents were also Holocaust survivors, the narrator's mother moved to Canada. Shortly thereafter, Magda passed away, and the narrator's mother blamed herself for Magda's death and subsequently experienced recurrent nightmares. When the narrator was a child, her mother rented an apartment separate from the family home to study to receive her Canadian medical license. Here, the book's dichotomy between art and parenthood takes root. The narrator inherited this dichotomy from her mother, and the opposition became part of the question of how to live meaningfully generations after the Holocaust, which the narrator and her mother continue to feel. The narrator describes her mother as always crying, believing, perhaps naively, that writing the book—*Motherhood*, or the *soul of time* as described within the text—will stop her mother's tears and ameliorate her mother's sadness. Thus, for the narrator, the book becomes both the stand-in for a child and a means of tending to intergenerational trauma while trying to create a different future. In this context, Heti invokes the story of Jacob's wrestling to make motherhood a matter of caring for one's mother and mother's ancestors.

The reader sees Heti's narrator compare herself with her "religious cousin," asking whether having children is the only form of ongoing resistance to genocide. She observes that her mother's attention was directed toward Magda. Reflecting on how the narrator's mother prioritized professional life over family life, the narrator observes, "My mother worked hard to justify her mother's life... She turned toward her mother not toward me" (2018, 200). The narrator then takes this inherited cue, choosing to direct maternal care not toward the next generation but toward the generations that came before.

That Heti's narrator picks this up from her own mother is significant because it simultaneously underscores and undermines her argument. On the one hand, the narrator learned to prioritize her career above all else from her mother, strengthening an established pattern within the family. On the other hand, that her mother had children and relentlessly pursued her career while her husband cared for the children suggests that the dichotomy between profession and motherhood has already been challenged. Motherhood, and parenthood, more broadly, are not inevitably incompatible with career pursuits so long as there is support from spouses and kin networks to raise children (Blair 2018). However, for Heti's narrator, care cannot take the form of both creating art and procreating (Currie 2020). Instead, art becomes

a form of care for past generations. Heti's narrator thus simultaneously highlights the power of texts and makes the uncomfortable equivalence between a book and a child. She wants to create something that will keep speaking into the future while she attends to a haunted past.

## Queering Jacob's Wrestling

*Motherhood's* narrator introduces the story of Jacob wrestling in a conversation with the coins about her nightmares. The narrator, like her mother, is haunted by disturbing dreams and receives confirmation from the coins that her dreams are the results of a demonic curse. The demon, however, proves to be angelic rather than devilish. The coins answer the narrator's question, "Is the situation like 'Jacob Wrestling with the Angel?'" with a resolute *yes* (Heti 2018, 58). The Torah portion *yayishlah* sees Jacob travel through the desert alone at night to reconcile with his twin brother Esau after having tricked their father Issac into giving Jacob Esau's birthright and fatherly blessing. Jacob then encounters a stranger—often described as an angel or his conscience—who will not let him pass. The two wrestle. As dawn approaches, Jacob has hold of the stranger and refuses to let them go until he receives a blessing. The stranger then renames Jacob "Israel [*Yisra-El*], for you have wrestled [*yisra*] with God [*El*] and with human beings, and you have survived" (Lew 2005, 28; brackets and italics in original). This passage cements Jacob's role as patriarch and progenitor of the Jewish people (*b'nei Yisrael*), thereby connecting him to Jewish futures (Eisen 2013). Heti's narrator invokes this parashah to orient herself toward Jewish pasts and, thereby, care for and nurture them. As a result, Heti both re-genders the story and redirects the future-oriented temporalities often associated with *yayishlah* and motherhood. These two reimaginings of the Torah portion are deeply intertwined and lay the foundation for *Motherhood's* queer temporalities.

Parashah *yayishlah* shows Jacob's transformation into patriarch and progenitor, but the Torah portion also contains potential for gender play and queer rereadings. Lori Lefkowitz's analysis of gender and patriarchy in the Hebrew Bible shows key male characters to be consistently small, domestic, and feminized (2010). Esau embodies what might now be considered hegemonic masculinity, which Sarra Lev connects to biblical representations of the Romans (Lev 2009). Esau is large, hairy, and a hunter. In one instance of Jacob's deception of their father, Issac, Jacob drapes animal furs over his arms to replicate those of the hairy Esau. Jacob thus becomes "a man in drag enacting masculinity" (Lefkowitz 2002, 94). This reading builds on Daniel Boyarin's argument that queer and Jewish masculinities are intertwined as a symptom of anti-Semitism and an in-community marker of Jewish difference (Boyarin 1997, 211). Yair Lipshitz, in an analysis of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, argues that it is only through wrestling with the angel that "Jacob enters the 'manly' space of

physical combat" (2012, 212). Therefore, wrestling becomes a way of stepping into gendered expectations and being marked by them, as the being with whom Jacob wrestled permanently injured him by dislocating his hip joint (Lev 2009). Wrestling enables Jacob to pass as a man (or to perform a masculinity that is not necessarily his own). Lefkowitz uses the phenomenon of passing to show how "Jewish men—at once 'adaptable as women' and positioned as women—expose gender itself as an effect, an imitation, and as performance" (2002, 96). The gender dynamics at play in Jacob's story have the potential to threaten the social order.

Heti's narrator describes how the childless woman is often cast as a threat. In her twenties, the narrator became pregnant and, upon seeking an abortion, was advised not to do so as she might still miscarry. The doctor steadfastly opposed the abortion, saying that the narrator ought to have the child and give it to him. But the narrator was resolute. She explains, "There is something at-loose-ends feeling about such a woman who does not have or raise children, raising the questions, what is she going to do instead? What sort of trouble will she make?" (Heti 2018, 32). As a childless woman who is uninterested in having children, Heti imagines herself as the same threat to the social order that Lefkowitz identifies with Jacob. For Heti, wrestling enables the narrator to perform incommensurate gendered expectations without fully assimilating into the role—the childless woman as mother. Women's transformations within the Hebrew Bible tend to revolve around childbearing. In Ellen Frankel's feminist rewriting of parashah *vayishlah* as a conversation between "Lilith the Rebel" and Miriam, Lilith renders wrestling feminine via a "tussle with the angel of death over [the birth of] each child," reinforcing women's transformations with childbearing. Miriam interjects, asking, "What of those of us who have never given birth ... Who will change our name from Barren one to Mother?" (Frankel 1998, 47). Heti's narrator would likely empathize with this vision of Miriam. Throughout *Motherhood*, the narrator decries the tendency to conceptualize the life of a woman without a child as the same as those who have given birth but just beforehand. She rails against childbirth as a requisite for access to change and transformation and, thereby, a different future.

Wrestling also has the potential to subvert futures that are conceptualized through linear and reproductive time. Comparative literature scholar Idit Alphandary's analysis of wrestling with the angel in Phillip Roth's novel *Operation Shylock* and Bernard Malamud's short story "Angel Levine" provides important insight here. Alphandary argues that these works "invest new literary and historical significance in man's [sic] struggle with the angel" (2008, 57). Both authors connect this struggle to the question of how to construct Jewish identity in the wake of the horrors of the Holocaust. In *Operation Shylock*, Roth, writing in first person, confronts his double in Israel. This *doppelgänger* has the same name and physical features. Where Roth contends that Zionism is the answer, his double argues that the place for Jews is in the diaspora.



Much to Roth's frustration, the double has been using the famous author's likeness to garner support and media attention for his plan to return Jews in Israel to Eastern Europe (Roth 1993). These "two incompatible protagonists" index how "the traumatic past of the Jews and the traumatic reality in the modern state of Israel are responsible for the emergence of two very rigid Jewish identities" (Alphandary 2008, 59). Wrestling embodies the struggle for the reconciliation of opposites that Rabbi Alan Lew identifies as an "integrated representation of self" (Lew 2005, 28). That is, "wrestling with God is to make in human action and on the human level the same unification of the same opposites that God unifies" (Waskow 1978, 10). Wrestling thus has queer resonances. It has not only been connected to queer sex (Lev 2009) but also challenges the stability of supposedly oppositional identity categories, enabling radical revisions of taken-for-granted identities.

Alphandary shows that Malamud's "Angel Levine" centres on a transformative confrontation with an Other (2008). Here, the white Jewish tailor Manischewitz encounters a Black angel. Manischewitz had recently "suffered many reverses and indignities": losing his shop to a fire and his wife's health declining as she suffered from "the hardening of arteries at an advanced stage" (Malamud 1983, 277–8). When the angel first appears in Manischewitz's bedroom, Manischewitz struggles to recognize the angel as Jewish, although he is aware of Black Jews. The meeting ushers in an identity crisis that again pulls into view the "rigid" boundaries of self and Other—and in this case, the question of who embodies Jewish identity (Alphandary 2008, 59; see also Kaufman 2015; Belzer et al. 2019; Lappe 2014). The story concludes with Manischewitz declaring to the angel Levine that he believed he was an angel, after which Manischewitz sees the angel depart from his rooftop "on a pair of strong black wings" (Malamud 1983, 289).

Heti's utilization of the angel trope similarly explores how to construct Jewish identity following the Holocaust but highlights the gendered expectation of rearing children. In doing so, Heti wrestles with multiple Others. Roth deliberated over *where* Jewish futures ought to unfold, and Heti asks if biological reproduction is the only ethical, moral response to life after genocide. Malamud's Manischewitz struggles to reconsider who counts and is recognizable as a Jew, and Heti asks who counts and is recognizable as a mother.

Wrestling also creates a generative tension between the past and the future. Alphandary's analysis connects the stranger in parashah *vayishlah* to Walter Benjamin's figure of the angel of history. The angel of history draws on "the present to project hope onto the past" so that new futures become possible (Alphandary 2008, 66). Benjamin discusses this projection in terms of "a secret agreement between past generations and the present one... Like every generation that has preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past lays claim" (2019,

917; italics in original). Unlike the “homogenous, empty time” that clocks measure (Benjamin 2019, 206–7), Messianic time constitutes an expansive present—one that “comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement” (Benjamin 2019, 208). As a result, a past that lays claim on present generations engenders an obligation to historical and mystical time. This obligation is familiar in Jewish practice, especially in liturgy and the multiple rituals for mourning and remembrance. This relationship of obligation dismantles conceptualizations of time as a linear continuum. The temporalities of wrestling twist, turn, overlap, and intersect, imbuing any moment with multiplicities in and of time. The result is the critical work of using the present to create hope within the past to bring livable futures into being.

### ***Motherhood's* Queer Tropes and Temporalities**

The yearning for queerness that permeates *Motherhood* is interwoven with the book's temporal politics. The narrator identifies queerness as a form of liberation from obligations to procreate. She wishes that she could “come out” as not wanting children the way that her gay male friends come out (2018, 160), and she suggests that desiring sex without desiring children “could even be called a sexual orientation” (2018, 161). This desire for queerness idealizes and essentializes queer entanglements with reproduction, biological, social, and economic. Namely, queerness is positioned as the antithesis of childbearing and childrearing. Defining queerness in this way is problematic for two reasons. First, it reinscribes the historic association of homosexuality with perversion that has undergirded the false notion that gays and lesbians are unfit parents (Rodríguez 2014). Second, it normalizes white expressions of queerness, as queer People of Colour have children at higher rates than their white counterparts (ibid.). Where Heti's *Motherhood* has received praise for its willingness to make uncomfortable and unpalatable statements about the expectations of motherhood, and where feminist critiques rightly highlight the false opposition between childrearing and artmaking (or any other profession), attention to Heti's utilization of queer tropes is troublingly lacking. These tropes belie essentialized conceptualizations of queerness that erase histories of struggle by idealizing perceived queer exemptions from heteronormative temporalities as natural outcomes of queerness.

Heti's version of queerness reproduces the antisocial theory that Lee Edelman popularized in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman expanded the antisocial thesis of queerness to include a queer temporality that opposed heteronormative reproductive time (2004). What he terms *the queer death drive* ushered in fierce debates over queer temporalities, particularly queer futures. Like Heti's narrator, Edelman rails against reproductive futurism. And he defines queerness in opposition to it. For Edelman, reproductive futurism centres on the figure of the Child who stands in for the generations to come. In this analytic frame, politics done in the name of the Child to come creates a future that queers are de facto excluded from

because homosexual sex forecloses the possibility of biological reproduction. The task of queerness then translates to rejecting futurism. This rejection is significant. In defining queerness through a negative, antisocial stance, Edelman “embrac [es] the homophobic alignment of queerness with the death drive” (Dean 2006, 827). The antisocial theory of queerness refuses to acquiesce to heteronormative temporalities and takes up homophobic discourse to define and celebrate queer differences.

*Motherhood* exemplifies this antisocial thesis of queerness in the following exchange between the narrator and Miles:

Last night, lying in bed, Miles said to me,  
 Nobody looks at a childless gay couple and thinks that their life must lack meaning because they didn't have kids.... Or take a lesbian couple who could have kids if they wished to, but chose not to for whatever reason.... Who looks at them and thinks they must be nurturing this bottomless regret and longing in their souls because they're not mothers? Nobody! (2018, 270)

This invocation of homosexuality is both essentializing and frustrating. It follows a pattern within *Motherhood* where the key—and problematic—insights the narrator almost unquestioningly latches onto come from Miles. Early in the book, Miles tells the narrator that she cannot be truly devoted to children and writing simultaneously, which Blair's review cites as a critical weakness in a book so often valued for its feminist insights: “Miles's point is simply allowed to stand without elaboration or investigation” (Blair 2018). Just as with the passage quoted above, the narrator does not confront or question the statement's integrity but takes it as a given. Although the narrator describes sadness in response to Miles's words, she ultimately turns “the question back on herself” (Blair 2018), reverting back to her agonizing ambivalence about inhabiting the role of a mother. The narrator's complicity with such statements from Miles reinforces the white heteropatriarchal authority associated with Edelman's antisocial thesis.

Questioning, when it does happen, occurs indirectly and in ways that reproduce antisocial definitions of queerness. The narrator explains, for example, that there is a “sadness at not living out a more universal story” (Heti 2018, 23). This sadness is wrapped up in profound isolation—from Miles, friends who are having children, and her mother. Queer positionalities are invoked to articulate and stand in for a space of liberation. Queerness provides an “escape” from the “punishing norms that discipline behavior” (Halberstam 2011, 3). By invoking queerness along the lines of the antisocial thesis and queer death drive, *Motherhood* commits multiple erasures of queer experiences. Heti fails to recognize the diverse forms that queer families take, especially in terms of childrearing and expansive kin networks. As a result, she, like Edelman, depicts reproductive futures as the only ones. This narrow imagination of

futures forecloses the possibility of queer futures, which Rodríguez shows are vital in the context of the children of queer People of Colour who “function as the co-constitutive nightmare of our nation’s [the United States] future” (Rodríguez 2014, 35). The antisocial thesis of queerness prioritizes queer identity above all others and ignores the forms of reproductive labour outside biological reproduction.

José Esteban Muñoz defines *queerness* as “primarily about futurity” (2006, 825). This framework takes seriously the task of imagining queer utopias rather than dismissing them as naïve or ideal (2009). In contrast to Edelman’s antisocial stance, queer futures are hyper-relational—they are “relational to historically situated struggles” and “the hopes of a collective” (Muñoz 2009, 3). This articulation of queerness in terms of futurity also resonates with Tim Dean’s invocation of Gilles Deleuze’s notion of becoming as invaluable to queer temporalities. Dean describes becoming as “a ceaseless movement of being that is not coordinated by teleology and that never results in anything resembling an identity” (Dean 2006, 827). Such becoming comprises an assemblage of intensities that are neither explained by nor beholden to the binary oppositions that structure life (Deleuze and Guattari 2022). That is, becoming is synonymous with an emergent otherwise that cracks open imaginations of what could be (Massumi 2002). Within this framework, queerness embodies “a horizon imbued with potentiality” (Muñoz 2009, 1). That is, “Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough” (Muñoz 2009, 88). Queer futures thus become radical spaces of resistance.

This long-rehearsed debate surrounding the antisocial thesis is worth revisiting precisely because Heti’s narrator falls into the same conceptual trappings as Edelman. Both reinscribe hegemonic narratives of social and biological reproduction. Heti’s narrator ranks the question of childbearing above all else and, through invocations of orientation and queer failure, prioritizes sexuality—and what should constitute a sexual orientation (i.e., not wanting children). Blair observes that “in the world of the novel, there is only one example of a writer—the narrator herself” (2018). The opposition between making art and mothering that the narrator constructs relies on such narrow imaginations of gendered labour. Edelman’s construction of queerness and queer temporality is likewise limited to representations of white men (Halberstam 2006; Muñoz 2006; Parvulescu 2017). He fails to acknowledge the existence of reproductive labour that occurs outside of biological reproduction and, as a result, demonstrates an “indifference to ‘women’s work’” (Parvulescu 2017, 88). Indeed, Edelman formulates the queer death drive and queer antisocial by rejecting relationality and the intersections of gender, race, and class with queer life. It is through neglect that Edelman circumvents consideration of the material world (Parvulescu 2017).

The antisocial thesis of queerness overlooks the material and political conditions that enable queer thriving—and *Motherhood*'s narrow focus on deciding whether to have children accomplishes the same. Materiality and political economy play a minimal role in *Motherhood*. This absence aligns the text with neoliberal mentalities and the overemphasis on individual choice. The narrator briefly references her mouse-infested Toronto apartment, but she is not interested in a structural critique of housing affordability in Toronto. In addition, few characters appear in *Motherhood*, and most of those who do go unnamed. These characters' speech often appears in italics, rendering those utterances almost as part of the narrator's inner world. In this way, *Motherhood* is anchored in the world of individual choice. This dimension of neoliberal mentality distinguishes the prochoice movement from movements for reproductive justice. The pro-choice framework relies on the neoliberal idiom of choice, which constitutes the prized condition for the exercise of agency (Brown 2005), whereas reproductive justice is dedicated to creating conditions for thriving and self- and collective-determination (Fried, Gutiérrez, Silliman 2016).

Although *Motherhood* also articulates neoliberal mentalities in how the narrator equates producing art with having children, this equivalency paradoxically speaks to politics and material histories in which the narrator is embedded. For the narrator, art becomes a substitute for children in such a way that both mother and artist are defined through their productivity. Value and meaning thereby are also conceptualized through productivity. This dichotomy between motherhood and profession reaches its apotheosis when the narrator compares herself with her religious cousin: "My religious cousin, who is the same age as I am, has six kids. And I have six books. Maybe there is no great difference in our faith—in what parts of ourselves we feel called to spread" (Heti 2018, 85). The moniker "religious cousin" stands for adherence to the biblical injunction to go forth and be fruitful and for the obligation to grow the Jewish population following the Holocaust. While many reviewers have been rightly frustrated with the equivalence that Heti draws between having children and writing books, one thing that is too often missed is the entanglement of the narrator's resistance to having children with her family's history. The narrator describes having children as *dividing* and *replicating* the lives of her mother and grandmother (Heti 2018, 199). Instead, she wants to keep their lives whole and ensure their experience is never repeated. In this vein, she asks if not having children might also be a viable response to the atrocities of the Holocaust:

I know that Jewish women are expected to repopulate from the losses of the Holocaust. *If you don't have children, the Nazis will have won.* I have felt this. *They wanted to wipe us from the earth, and we must never let them.* Then how can I imagine *not* having children...

Rather than repopulating the world, might it not be better to say, *We have learned*

*from our history about the farthest reaches of cruelty, sadism and evil. And so in protest, we will make no more people ... in retaliation for the crimes that were committed against us. We will make no more aggressors and no more victims.* (Heti 2018, 162; emphasis in original)

Part of the narrator's opposition to childbearing is the vulnerability of flesh and the inevitability of mortality. The narrator explains, "I want to make a child that will not die—a body that will speak and keep on speaking" (2018, 199). Her answer to this desire is to write books. This response reveals a futurism implicated in the narrator's attachment to motherhood despite her rejection of reproductive futurism.

Although Heti's queer tropes reflect Edelman's antisocial thesis and its pitfalls, the Messianic time of wrestling draws *Motherhood's* temporal politics closer to Muñoz's queer horizons. *Motherhood's* temporal politics interweave Benjamin's angel of history and Messianic time with Muñoz's queer horizons. Benjamin's Messianic time imagines the present as full and expansive, in contrast to modernity's disenchanting and empty time. Within the framework of Messianic time, an otherwise is always possible and potentially emergent (1968). Muñoz similarly is "attentive to the past in order to critique the present" (2009, 1), an action taken to work toward the realization of utopian futures. Jacob's wrestling with an angel, as Benjamin's angel of history, "projects hope" into the past (Alphandary 2008, 63). Heti's narrator thus imagines that her book will embody hope for her mother and grandmother. She believes that the right words will enable her to bear witness to her mother's and grandmother's sadness without end.

This sense of continuity—of a book as "a child that will not die" (Heti 2018, 199)—connects the narrator to queer futurity and Jacob as the progenitor of the Jewish people. Heti's narrator thus works to formulate a version of reproduction that meets sociological and theological obligations. As Adam Kirsch observes, "When the past makes such demands, perhaps there is not enough attention left for a new generation" (2018). Here, the narrator, as the childless woman, is no longer the threat to the social order that the antisocial queer figure embodies. She refuses to relinquish motherhood and redefines it. In a temporal reversal of biological reproduction, she becomes a mother to her own mother and maternal line.

## **Jewish Continuity Discourse and Queer Futurity**

*Motherhood* was published in 2018, the same year as Katie Rosenblatt, Lila Corwin Berman, and Ronit Stahl's *Forward* article "How Jewish Academic Created a #Me-Too Disaster." The article connects allegations of sexual misconduct against Stephen M. Cohen to his ideological commitments to Jewish continuity (2018). Rosenblatt, Berman, and Stahl argue that both sexual misconduct and continuity discourse are

expressions of misogyny. Both reveal attempts to control women's reproductive decisions (Rosenblatt, Berman, and Stahl 2020). Continuity discourses express acute demographic anxiety over rising intermarriage rates, particularly of Jewish women to non-Jewish men. Much Jewish communal research suggests that Jewish mothers are central to the sense of community belonging and ritual observance. What this research neglects, however, are the institutional norms that fail to create welcome spaces for interfaith families. Although some responses concede that fertility and intermarriage ought not to constitute the central thrust of approaches to continuity, these responses continue to emphasize the relationship between fertility and community vitality (Hartman 2020, 236) and building a family as a sacred obligation (Bitton 2021; Shain and Williams 2020, 202).

*Motherhood* engages in conversation with continuity debates intertextually, a concept derived from Mikhail Bakhtin's work that describes each utterance as "pregnant" with every other utterance it has encountered (1981, 365). *Motherhood's* queer temporalities intervene in the heated debates surrounding Jewish continuity. Although Heti does not engage in these debates directly, *Motherhood* enters these discussions via what Edward Said calls *the worldliness of the text* (1983, 152). Said uses this concept to expand the analytical scope beyond the utterance to the material world in which the utterance materializes. The text is a cultural object part of the material world.

*Motherhood's* challenge to reproductive futurity questions the centrality of pronatalism in the politics of belonging and the construction of Jewish futures. Jewish feminists have rightly critiqued continuity discourse's preoccupation with women's reproductive decisions—around partnership and childbearing—rather than working to support parents (Ridner 2021). The centrality of choice in *Motherhood* resonates with continuity discourses' preoccupation with reproductive decisions. For example, while Heti's narrator bemoans her isolation from friends who now have young children, she fails to recognize new mothers' isolation (Blair 2018). Further, the continuity debate's focus on reproductive choices obscures "the incredible creativity and ingenuity that can be marshalled by all members of the community, childless or otherwise, toward better fulfilling this essential collective task" (Ridner 2021).

In this way, *Motherhood* also serves as a reminder of what preoccupation with choice neglects and erases. Choice ignores the structures of violence that foreclose the possibilities of reproductive decision-making—such as the North American histories of forced sterilization targeting Black and Indigenous peoples, People of Colour, and those with disabilities (Fried et al. 2013). In the context of continuity discourse, choice also tends to operate within an exclusively heterosexual framework. Samira K. Mehta and Brett Krutzsch, in their article on the changing Jewish family, show that rabbinical support of gay marriage in the United States only gained more momentum in the 1990s when marriage equality emerged as the public face of the gay rights movement

(2020). Marriage equality meant that gay coupling would not violating the norms of the heterosexual nuclear family. Because sexual orientation was considered biological and not a choice, homosexuality gained greater sympathy than interfaith marriage, which was thought to embody an errant and irresponsible choice that rejected the importance of Jewish continuity in post-war North America.

Mehta and Brett's analysis highlights the limiting criteria for communal belonging that have prompted historically marginalized communities in North American Jewish intuitions—namely, queer folks and Black, Indigenous, and Jews of Colour—to build alternative spaces of belonging (Belzer et al. 2019). Preparing for and embracing racial diversity make the difference between a growing and shrinking future. Elana Kaufman, executive director of the Jews of Color Initiative, explains in response to demographic anxieties about Jewish futures, “If we prepare, we will become more inclusive, and we expand and we will grow. If we stay as we are, we are going to tumble backward into a past where we just don't count and value all Jews” (2015, 13:26). Her words resonate with an anecdote from Rabbi Benay Lappe, the founder of Svava, the queer Talmud yeshiva: On the first day of rabbinical school at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the head of the school was late to an address to the first-year students. He had received a call from a sociologist friend about the soon-to-be-released results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. The sociologist said that although there would be Jews in fifty years, they would be unrecognizable. Rabbi Lappe asks, is this so bad? (Lappe 2014) In the same vein, Heti's *Motherhood* asks whether biological reproduction is not the only way to pursue Jewish futures.

### Queering time

*Motherhood* challenges readers to collapse binary oppositions between past and future, childlessness and parenthood. The book's tension between past and future animates the narrator's attention to body, sadness, and trauma—all of which Heti names *motherhood*. The narrator refuses to relinquish motherhood and redefines it as caring for one's mother(s). This resignification of motherhood is not just a reversal of heteronormative temporality but a radical confounding of it that Heti accomplishes by reworking Jacob's wrestling. Wrestling inextricably intertwines opposites and, in Waskow's analysis, approximates divinity “in human action” (Waskow 1978, 10). Jacob's wrestling in parashah ayishla sees his transformation into the patriarch Israel, the namesake of the Jewish people—the passage gestures toward future generations and the past as Jacob travels to reconcile with his twin Esau. Heti leverages the queer kernels in parashah ayishla. Rather than Jacob wrestling with an Other that enables his reunion with Esau, Heti's narrator wrestles with her reproductive body, the expectation and obligation of Jewish women to have children. Other literary invocations of Jacob wrestling have also focused on encounters with an Other. On this point, Alphandary's connection between wrestling and Benjamin's angel of



history is instructive. This figure “projects hope” into the past (Alphandary 2008, 63). Here, extending hope into the past becomes pivotal to constructing Jewish identity following the Holocaust. Wrestling thus disrupts linear time, making it possible to parent one’s ancestors.

While *Motherhood*’s queer longings are compellingly entangled with Jacob’s wrestling, they fall short. The book’s queer tropes rely on the narrow imaginations of queerness (reflecting similarly narrow treatment of gender) that the antisocial thesis posits. These imaginations effectively assign futures to heteronormativity. Yet, Heti’s invocation of parashah *vayishlah* recalls the angel of history whose Messianic time heralds a kinship with Muñoz’s definition of queerness as futurity—a form of becoming, and a utopian otherwise. Wrestling wrangles these divergent visions of the future into the same narrative. Where *Motherhood* misses the mark is therefore instructive. Heti’s emphasis on choice puts her in direct conversation with continuity debates that revolve around reproductive decisions. Preoccupation with choice risks slipping into a neoliberal mentality that obscures attention to structural violence. Fixation on choice occludes the norms through which queer folks and Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour are marginalized, including within Jewish institutional settings, making choice an inadequate foundation for meaningful transformation. *Motherhood* calls for the narrator to be blessed for the wrestling that led her to childlessness. Heti does not unequivocally advocate that no one have children. Instead, she creates a decidedly Jewish form of childlessness. *Motherhood* imagines how Jewish continuity might be queered, expanded, and pushed beyond sole reliance on biological reproduction—and shows the potential pitfalls in this work. This resignification of motherhood thus embarks on a queer theology of time wherein turning toward ancestors is not a rejection of the future but a commitment to utopic horizons.

## Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Association for Canadian Jewish Studies 2021 Conference, where I received generative comments. The anonymous reviewers provided invaluable feedback that was instrumental to realizing the final manuscript. I am very grateful to Rabbi Yosef Berman for sharing their parashah *vayishlah* source sheet and Robin Banerji for his generous help with transliteration. I also thank the editorial team at CJS/Ejc for their guidance.

**References**

- Alphandary, I. 2008. "Wrestling with the Angel and the Law, or the Critique of Identity: The Demjanjuk Trial, Operation Shylock: A Confession, and 'Angel Levine.'" *Philip Roth Studies* 4 (1): 57–74.
- Bakhtin, M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. University of Texas Press Slavic Series; No. 1. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Belcourt, B-R. 2020. *A History of My Brief Body*. Columbus, Ohio: Two Dollar Radio.
- Belzer, Tobin, Tory Brundage, Vincent Calvetti, Gage Gorsky, Ari Y. Kelman, and Dalya Perez, 2019. "Beyond the Count: Perspectives and Lived Experiences of Jews of Color." [https://jewsofcolorinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/BEYONDTHECOUNT.FINAL\\_.8.12.21.pdf](https://jewsofcolorinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/BEYONDTHECOUNT.FINAL_.8.12.21.pdf)
- Benjamin, W. 1968. *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Bitton, M. 2021. "Is Jewish Continuity Sexist? On Jewish Values and Female Bodies." *Sources* (Spring). <https://www.sources-journal.org/articles/is-jewish-continuity-sexist>
- Blair, E. 2018. "Mother of All Decisions: Sheila Heti's New Novel Weighs Whether to Have a Child." *New York Times* (May 18). <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/books/review/sheila-heti-motherhood.html>
- Boyarin, D. 1997. *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brown, W. 2005. *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Currie, M. 2020. "Maybe Baby: Uncertainty and Decision in Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*." *Textual Practice* 36(1): 116–134. doi: [10.1080/0950236X.2020.1789207](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1789207)
- Dean, T. 2006. "The Antisocial Homosexual." In "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory" Special Issue, *PMLA* 121 (3): 819–828.
- Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Edelman, L. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Eisen, A. M. 2013. "Jacob's Fear." November 13, 2013. <http://www.jtsa.edu/jacobs-fear>.
- Frankel, E. 1998. *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*. First Harper Collins edition. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- Freeman, H. 2018. "Do women really need to choose between motherhood and art?" *Guardian* (June 9). <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/jun/09/hadley-freeman-women-motherhood-or-art>
- Fried, M.G., E. Gutiérrez, L. Ross, J. Silliman. 2016. *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books.
- Halberstam, J. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hartman, H. 2020. "Babies and Bathwater." *American Jewish History* 104 (2): 235–38.
- Heti, S. 2018. *Motherhood*. New York, New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Kaufman, E. 2015. "Racism in the Jewish Community: The Uncomfortable Truth." *EliTalks YouTube* (August 4). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcTBqbsZ-PLo>
- Kirsch, A. 2018. "The Art of Parenthood." *Atlantic* (May 13). <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/05/the-art-of-parenthood/559937/>
- Kranson, R. 2020. "Sexuality in American Jewish History: The State of an Emerging Sub-Field." *American Jewish History* 104 (4): 493–513. doi: [10.1353/ajh.2020.0048](https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2020.0048).
- Lappe, B. 2014. "1, 2, 3, CRASH! How to Navigate Inevitable Change: Benay Lappe at TEDxSpenceSchool." *Youtube* (February 23). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTdelFK7VSc>
- Lefkowitz, L.H. 2010. *In Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities*. New York, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

- Lefkowitz, L.H. 2002. "Passing as a Man: Narratives of Jewish Gender Performance." *Narrative* 10(1): 91–103.
- Lev, S. 2009. "Esau's Gender Crossing: Parashat Toldot (Genesis 25:19–28:9)" In *Torah Queeries*, edited by G. Drinkwater, J. Lesser, and D. Schneer, 38–42. Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible. New York, New York: NYU Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg8kk.10>
- Lew, A. 2005. *Be Still and Get Going: A Jewish Meditation Practice for Real Life*. New York: Little Brown and Company.
- Lipshitz, Y. 2012. "The Jacob Cycle in Angels in America: Re-Performing Scripture Queerly." *Prooftexts: a Journal of Jewish Literary History* 32(2): 203–238.
- Lucas, M. 2018. "To Be or Not To Be: A Review of Sheila Heti's 'Motherhood.'" *The Lifted Brow* (June 15). <https://www.theliftebrow.com/liftedbrow/to-be-or-not-to-be-a-review-of-sheila-hetis-motherhood-by-madelaine-lucas>
- Malamud, B. 1983. *The Stories of Bernard Malamud*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Massumi, M. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mehta, S. K. and B. Kruttsch. 2020. "The Changing Jewish Family: Jewish Communal Responses to Interfaith and Same-Sex Marriage." *American Jewish History* 104 (4): 553–577. [doi:10.1353/ajh.2020.0051](https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2020.0051)
- Muñoz, J.E. 2009. *Cruising Utopia the Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Sexual Cultures Series. New York: New York University Press.
- Muñoz, J. E. 2006. "Thinking Beyond Antirelativity and Antiutopianism in Queer Theory." In "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory." *PMLA* 121 (3): 819–828.
- Parvulescu, A. 2020. "Reproduction and Queer Theory: Between Lee Edelman's *No Future* and J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*." *PLMA* 132 (1): 86–100. [doi:10.1632/pmla.2017.132.1.86](https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2017.132.1.86)
- Rindner, S. 2021. "Jewish Continuity and Jewish Destiny: It's Not Just About You." *Sources Journal* 2021. <https://www.sourcesjournal.org/response-jewish-continuity-and-jewish-destiny-its-not-just-about-you>
- Rodríguez, J.M. 2014. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. New York: New York University Press.
- Rosenblatt, K., L.C. Berman, and R.Y. Stahl. 2020. "Continuity Crisis: The History and Sexual Politics of an American Jewish Communal Project." *American Jewish History* 104 (2): 167–94.
- Rosenblatt, K., L.C. Berman, and R.Y. Stahl. 2018. "How Jewish Academia Created A #MeToo Disaster—The Forward," July 19, 2018. <https://forward.com/opinion/406240/how-jewish-academia-created-a-metoo-disaster/>
- Roth, P. 1993. *Operation Shylock*. New York, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Said, E. W. 1983. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Schwartz, A. 2018. "Sheila Heti Wrestles with a Big Decision in 'Motherhood.'" *New Yorker* (May 7). <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/05/07/sheila-heti-wrestles-with-a-big-decision-in-motherhood>
- Shain, M. and M. Williams. 2020. "Continuity and the Politics of an American' Mitzvah." *American Jewish History* 104 (2–3): 201.
- Shulevitz, J. 2022. "The Smutty Mystic: What everyone gets wrong about Sheila Heti's fiction." *The Atlantic* (February 10). <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/03/sheila-heti-pure-colour-review/621312/>
- Waskow, A. 1978. *Godwrestling*. New York: Schocken Books.