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Review of Amanda Hess's *Second life: Having a child in the digital age* (2025). New York: Doubleday.

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Amanda Hess, who writes about pop culture and the internet for the *New York Times,* begins *Second life: Having a child in the digital age* with the statement, "this is an account of a relationship with technology" (p. 1). Yet Hess signals early on that the text will dig much deeper than a description of how she engages with tech's latest offerings. Indeed, she reflects on how technology has become embedded in our most intimate personal spaces--in this case, people's menstrual, prenatal, and postnatal lives—and ultimately offers insight into the ways in which technology contributes to transhistorical anxieties about disability and the cultural preoccupation with identifying and eliminating it. Hess recounts the journey she and her partner embarked upon during her pregnancy and early years with their son Alma (not the child's real name, but one ascribed to him by an unknown internet user or bot that took a guess based on other traces of information on the internet). Alma is born with a rare genetic condition, and Hess reflects on what it means to become the parent of a disabled child in today's technology-reliant world, with attention to the ways in which technological tools and those who yield them profoundly shape narratives and understandings of disability, even before its presence is confirmed. At a broader level, Hess explores how technology is designed to not only provide the answers that many expectant parents are seeking, but to shape the questions they are supposed to be asking; its inflexible reflection of the social norms assigned to pregnancy and childbirth and 'normal' human development; its uneasy relationship with disability; and its subtle yet persistent messaging regarding how we should feel about all of this. Hess thus broadens contemporary conversations about technology to one that will be of interest to disability studies scholars, students, and anyone interested in considering the impact of commonplace technological tools on fundamental questions concerning disability, parenting, and family.

Hess's journey begins with an innocent engagement with Flo, a menstrual tracker that promises to help her not be surprised by her period's "unannounced arrival" (p. 11) each month. Engaging a critical perspective that she uses throughout the text, Hess soon realizes that Flo's function goes beyond that of helpful scheduling assistant and extends into ever-more personal roles, including fertility-tracking administrator and pregnancy coach. Once pregnant, Hess realizes that the technology not only tracks everything that happens in and to our bodies but also indicates what we can anticipate encountering, and how we should respond if what we learn does not align with our expectations.

Hess's story deepens when the technology used in her prenatal care reveals that her baby has a high likelihood of having a disability. In the space of one ultrasound appointment, she finds herself transported to a whole new social landscape, a transition facilitated by a doctor who, at the beginning of the appointment is an invisible figure tasked only with interpreting the onscreen image, suddenly appears and "rewind[s] the tape of her life" (p. 8) from an ordinary woman having an ordinary pregnancy to one who has entered an unfamiliar and, owing his serious comportment and advice not to google the words he has scribbled on a piece of paper, frightening place. It is during this "hour on the table" (p. 8) that Hess's relationship with technology shifts incontrovertibly. Despite her ingrained conviction that if she could just "search it smart and fast enough, the internet would save us," (ibid) she realizes that it is not going to give her the answers she is hoping for, launching her irreversibly from a faithful and unquestioning user into an alert Bourdieu-like observer of the internet's incapacities.

Hess enters the world of the expectant parent of a disabled child, which she soon realizes is a very different place than the world of the expectant of 'normal' children. Thrown into a steady stream of medical appointments, she is bombarded with information from both the medical community and alarmist internet sources, her "search history [becoming] a map of anxieties" (p. 71). The falseness of technology's promise to celebrate each person as unique and extraordinary is revealed, as it attempts to keep expectant parents confined to what is culturally desired: average babies with predictable outcomes and achievements, the first of which will be the joyous end to a trouble-free pregnancy. While Hess's account may not be reassuring to those currently expecting or planning to have a child, particularly if concerns about the fetus are raised, she indicates the ableist assumptions one is likely to encounter and details the work, both emotionally and as an advocate, that resisting the negative tropes will entail.

Hess also becomes aware of technology's eugenic function. She realizes the extent to which technology contributes to state surveillance, a situation that of course pre-existed her pregnancy, but is heightened when one becomes the bearer of a future productive (or not) citizen. Hess learns that in the patriotic narrative of bearing healthy children, there is a central role she is expected to play—that of the "thrilled mother-to-be"—its narrative unfolding in the very public "theatre of [her] body" (p. 65). When it becomes clear that her baby might have a disability, this theatre becomes a fraught space, on view to an even larger audience and crowded with others' opinions and self-incriminating questions. Hess recounts her own self-blame around the condition her child is living with, relaying with almost painful honesty the complex feelings that many expectant parents experience when the possibility of disability first enters their story, absorbing the eugenic narrative of personal responsibility while simultaneously trying to resist it in medical and social encounters.

Thus, what begins as a reflection on very specific and current technologies becomes a contribution to the record of transhistorical and universal preoccupations with what critical disability studies scholar Robert McRuer refers to as "compulsory able-bodiedness" (pp. 1-32). Although the diagnostic tools and technologies to which Hess is subjected can detect abnormalities with a precision unimaginable ten years ago, the questions and reactions that she and her partner encounter are consistent with those raised decades ago. Hess points out that our concern should not only be about the extent to which new technologies seek out and perseverate on detected differences, but to the relentless ableism that fuels it and the unchanging nature of society's responses once differences are identified. Although we have developed advanced abilities to detect abnormities pre-birth, this has not been met, for the most part, with a corresponding increase in acceptance and inclusion. Hess confirms that we are not going to find answers to questions about the crux of human diversity and belonging through technological or scientific advancements; this will come only through a moral shift in how we view disability and difference.

As evidence of the transhistorical nature of the topic, her account resonates with additional decades-old Disability Studies scholarship concerning parenting a disabled child. This includes work by Gail Landsman (1999, 1998) who, at the cusp of the 21st century, recounted women's experiences of becoming the mother of a disabled child and reflected on the intersection between disability and cultural interpretations of difference within the context of late modern capitalism. Hess's account also aligns with more recent work on the intersection between reproduction, technology and disability such as that by Leslie Reagan (2010), and Jen Rinaldi's (2016) more recent reflection on the "social and political work" of fetal imagery.

This is a rich text. In addition to reflections on her personal experience, Hess ventures into analyses of pregnancy spin-offs that feed the capitalist determination to profit from every stage of human life. These include the voracious world of pregnancy marketing: when Hess discovers she is pregnant, she learns that pregnancy marketers have, eerily, almost beaten her to it. After switching from the menstrual to pregnancy mode on Flo, her feeds are immediately flooded with maternity advertising and brands, advertisements that perform the double-duty of fostering the "identity crisis of motherhood" (p. 36) and then exploiting the anxiety they have engendered by promises of relief through correct consumption. Hess also explores the free birth movement, a cultural phenomenon which advocates for medical-free pregnancies and childbirth. Hess describes this as something that may work for some but, either intentionally or through ignorance, minimizes and even negates the possibility of complicated pregnancies or the births of children with actual medical needs, another example of the cultural abhorrence toward and avoidance of the births of atypical children. Hess also includes an analysis of the glossy advertising of American maternity hospitals, more concerned with a slick public image and creating a simulacrum of a perfect birth than with what one should actually expect once one goes into labour. In these sections, the text diverges slightly from the relationship between technology and disability into exposés of thinly-disguised capitalist ventures that play on parents' anxious desire to "do the right thing" (read: purchase) for their children, a materialist critique that resonates with social model principles that challenge the notion that a non-producing and non-consuming body is ultimately a useless one.

Finally, and of greater interest to Disability Studies scholars, Hess discusses her own heightened awareness of pervasive ableism once Alma is born. These encounters range from the virtuous comments of expectant friends who gesture their open-mindedness by stating that they do not care about the sex of the baby, but are, rather, "just happy that she's healthy" (p. 184), to the pressure she and her partner encounter to consent to surgical intervention on Alma. The latter was an ultimately distressing journey that left them questioning the true priorities of the medical establishment and exposed them to the ableism embedded in medical approaches to disability, obfuscated by the narrative of 'doing what is best for the child.'

Hess ends her book by landing on a truth that all parents eventually come to know. We want so much to be the parents our children need before they have even arrived, and the façade of technology and the capitalist urges that fuel it allow us to falsely believe that this is possible. Yet, as Hess points out, we cannot be that person until our children are here. Every day, Hess writes, we unbecome and become that person again and again, a universal process of becoming in relationship that includes everyone and is the heart of human experience.

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