# Preface

Gender and identity occupy the front line in today’s culture wars. At the heart of this book is a set of surveys I conducted between 2016 and 2022, asking tens of thousands of anonymous respondents all over the United States simple but intimate questions about their behavior and identity, and especially about gender and sexuality. The window into people’s lives afforded by these surveys is a bit like the one opened in the middle of the 20th century by sex researcher Alfred Kinsey and his collaborators, whose wonky, questionnaire-based reports scandalized postwar America. The Kinsey reports concluded that, to use today’s language, people were a lot queerer than had been assumed, and less easily categorized. Cracks were showing in the façade of the white, middle class, heterosexual “normalcy” on display in media— Dick and Jane in the 1950s, the Flintstones and the Jetsons in the 1960s, the Brady Bunch in the 1970s. My surveys don’t just show that these cracks have widened, but that this whole edifice was an artifact of its own historical era, long gone. We’re living in a different world now, and probably always were. Sex and gender are complicated. Suppressing this complexity with received moral wisdom about what is and isn’t “natural” has become increasingly untenable. Young and urban people, especially, aren’t buying it.

But why have *I* been conducting these surveys? My own gender, sexuality, and family life are unremarkable, even by last century’s standards. Neither am I a sexologist, sociologist, or anthropologist. I work on artificial intelligence at a big tech company, which on the face of it seems unrelated. Digging a bit deeper, though, the rapid advance of AI has forced my colleagues and I to think hard about who we are— how inclusively humanity defines itself, and how we envision our collective future. These questions are far from academic. Computers have become enmeshed in our personal lives, moving in just a few years from a workplace tool to an interface mediating our most intimate relationships. This makes the intersection of AI and privacy, one of my team’s main areas of research, an urgent topic. It also means that computers are starting to look less like tools than like extensions of our bodies and minds, always on and always connected. Neural nets are increasingly able to model the world and interact with us on our own terms, which will soon imply all sorts of human-AI relationships. Where is this headed? What kind of world will our kids grow up in?

It’s telling that “the future” and “our children” are so naturally bound up together. This association, along with the nurturing, protective values that tend to accompany it, has sometimes been called *reproductive futurism*.[[1]](#footnote-21) It’s hard to argue against being “pro child,” especially if the alternative is framed as selfish, uncaring, or short-sighted. Also, children are sweet. They’re presumed innocent, either not having had the chance yet to make really bad decisions, or not yet being old enough to take full responsibility for them. For obvious evolutionary reasons, many of us are powerfully compelled to nurture and protect them, especially when we believe they’re “ours”— which might mean nationally or tribally, and can of course include adoption, but most often means genetically. In this sense, reproductive futurism is bound up in heterosexuality, in having and raising kids who will propagate your genes. And in the old days, the more the better.

Increasingly, though, it’s becoming clear that for our civilization to survive, we need to have fewer kids, not more. This isn’t about curtailing our future, but about embracing it. Civilization is far more than the sum of its human reproductive lineages; it’s about our relationships with one other, the knowledge and cultures we’ve built up over thousands of years, our institutions, our cities and our countryside, our sciences and technologies, our languages and our art. This implies a shift from reproductive futurism to something more like ecological and civilizational futurism. It implies that gender and sexuality have a different role to play now, with biological reproduction no longer center stage— and that’s precisely what we see happening. Queer identities and nontraditional relationships of all kinds are becoming far more common, and many of them aren’t focused on making babies. Even for young people who are heterosexual and fairly traditional, the likelihood of marrying and having kids is in sharp decline worldwide, especially in cities and in the more economically developed countries.[[2]](#footnote-22)

Not everyone is happy with these changes. One of my more traditionally minded survey respondents wrote, “all these homos will burn in hell. What would happen to a animal species that went gay, I’ll tell you, they would all go extinct… bunch of dipshits.”[[3]](#footnote-23) Birth control and access to abortion have of course played an even larger role in this shift than “going gay,” so unsurprisingly, these technologies, too, have become flashpoints in the culture wars. At their core, the culture wars are about who we are now, how we define what’s “natural” and whether that’s actually desirable, and to what extent we can redefine ourselves over time without becoming something entirely *un*natural, alien… *other*. Since everyone alive today would likely seem thoroughly alien to a paleolithic human, perhaps our cultural debate is just about our maximum comfortable rate of change.

This same struggle to define and delimit humanity in some elusive “natural” state animates a long-simmering debate about the Olympics. The entire premise of such competitions is fraught with contradiction, in that they harness human ingenuity and our capability for self-modification to select for and continually expand the limits of what bodies can do. Somewhat arbitrarily, caffeine and high altitude training are allowed, but blood doping and steroids aren’t. Meanwhile, the Paralympic games, originally a gesture toward greater human inclusivity, have turned the tables. Paralympians with prosthetics are now beating Olympians at running, and as technology improves, they’ll doubtless do so in other events too. Where to draw the line? Decisions to allow or prohibit specific technologies will come to look increasingly absurd— as will decisions to allow or prohibit people, or to classify them “fairly.” For instance, in order to allow women to meaningfully compete as runners, their events have been segregated from men’s; yet doing so all but guarantees that people with intersex characteristics will rise to the top of certain women’s events. This puts committees in the position of policing gender boundaries, a project this book will argue is not only uncomfortable but actually impossible. Similar controversies have started to break out on a much more local scale over trans kids competing in gendered school sports programs. At some point, we’ll need to admit to the futility of trying to police categories like female and male, natural and augmented. We’re *all* augmented, both physically and intellectually.

On optimistic days, I imagine natural systems, together with blended human and machine intelligence, converging into something smart, intentional, and planet-wide. I don’t think of AI and human intelligence in opposition, or of one as subservient to the other in some kind of Medieval Chain of Being; rather, I think that all intelligence on Earth is part of a larger whole. I hope that we can think and act soon on a planetary scale, because the existential threats we now face are all planetary in scale too— and largely of our own making: climate collapse, pollution, pandemics, droughts and crop failures, desperate mass migrations. We’ve gotten into this pickle thanks to the advanced technologies civilization has developed over thousands of years, enabling us to explode in numbers, burn fuels, and consume resources far in excess of what can be sustained. It’s not just human bodies that are burning and consuming too much, but cows, factories, jet engines, and crops— a multispecies, cyborg lichen whose reach has, for the moment, exceeded its grasp. Major changes will be needed. Our challenge is that while our technologies may be collective, our actions, our will, and the ways we identify are still not collective enough.

1. Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
2. Kulu, “Why Do Fertility Levels Vary between Urban and Rural Areas?”; Ortiz-Ospina and Roser, “Marriages and Divorces”; Roser, “Fertility Rate.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
3. A 33 year old man from Kalamazoo, Michigan. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)