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Who Has More Life? Authentic Bodies and the Ethopolitics of Stem Cells

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Abstract
This essay discusses contemporary U.S. debates over human embryonic stem-cell (hESC) research. Central characteristics of these debates, we argue, are the actors and bodies who come to represent “life itself”—a life either to be protected by or protected from hESC research. When biomedical research enters into the hybrid space of media and politics, some actors emerge as having “more life”—and therefore more authenticity and legitimacy—in raising ethical claims than others. We will argue that the bodies of children and celebrities act as particularly authentic bodies, and as forceful representatives in ethopolitical struggles. This, we will argue, relates to children and celebrities being “real” though also “blank,” in the sense of inviting identifications and projections. They embody unspecific potentiality and can act as images of a common future more profoundly than the bodies of “ordinary people.”

Introduction
Joan’s Story

A broadcast television spot shows a woman, Joan, who tells about the changes to her life brought about from being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. The viewers see family photos showing Joan on a mountaintop and at her wedding. In the following, we see Joan walking with difficulty, leaning against a cane and with a wall-clock ticking. Sitting in her living room, Joan addresses the viewer: “None of these [treatments] can cure me, and actually create a whole new nervous system for my body like stem cells
Joan’s husband says: “There is no controversy that Joan is a human being, a living, breathing mother of three and a loving wife. She is here with us, not sitting in a freezer somewhere.” Clock ticking. Joan adds: “If that was sitting next to me, a Petri dish with this mass of cells, and you look at me [points to herself] who has more life? [in tears] Is it me, my family and children, or this Petri-dish mass of cells? Who has more life? It is me!”

Joan uses herself and her body as a representation of life—life that should be protected by stem-cell technology. In other media situations, different bodies are used to represent the life that should be protected from stem-cell technology.

This essay will look at representations and actors mobilized in stem-cell politics in the argument over who most deserves protection: those needing protection by stem-cell technology, or those needing protection from it? Our illustrative empirical examples are taken from U.S. debates over human embryonic stem cells (hESC)—in particular, public media debates from the last six years, as these debates have entailed particularly enlightening and spectacular occurrences and therefore work well to illustrate the points we wish to make.

We will ask which representational practices are at play when biomedical research enters into the hybrid space of media and politics. When publicly debating the use of embryos for stem-cell research, who or what comes to represent life—and how? We will argue that the bodies of children and celebrities come forth as having “more life” in these debates. Joan’s statement—that “real people” like herself have more life than cells—is a forceful one, one that is used in many stem-cell debates. But the child and the celebrity have something to


2. We take as a starting point U.S. president George W. Bush’s 2001 statement introducing the American public to his reflection on hESC research and his decision to allow publicly funded research only for already-existing stem-cell lines derived from hESC, while prohibiting further public funding for hESC research in which embryos would be destroyed. Our empirical material has been collected primarily through Internet sources, but should not be seen as an exhaustive mapping of the ongoing mobilization of representations in the stem-cell controversy, which spans continents and involves an array of different people and organizations and even different controversies. Our objective is to point to some specific forms of representations—a taxonomy of embodied representation—which seem to be more potent than others when issues of “life itself” is put up for public debate.

offer that ordinary people do not. We will argue, in conclusion, that while children and celebrities are as “real” in their embodied suffering and joy as “ordinary people,” they are also “blank,” in the sense of inviting identifications and projections. They embody unspecific potentiality and can act as images of a common future more profoundly than the bodies of ordinary people such as Joan.

**Ethopolitics and the Body**

Parts of the hESC controversy and its media coverage have been analyzed elsewhere as examples of the increased merging of press/politics and biopolitics, and as the emergence of a specific “morality politics.” These analyses introduce the important question of how value judgments seem to be central to the ways in which the hESC debates have been covered in the media. It is at this point that our question of “who has more life” connects to such value judgments, and as such plays a part in shaping contemporary biopolitics.

Nikolas Rose has suggested that contemporary biopolitics is being shaped by three interrelated configurations: risk politics, molecular politics and ethopolitics. Put very crudely, risk politics is the concern for and calculation of our probable biological futures, and molecular politics is the opening up of our fundamental biomedical makeup for alteration and enhancement.

Finally, the concept of ethopolitics, which is the aspect of biopolitics that this essay will be concerned with, is the ways in which “the ethos of human existence—the sentiments, moral nature or guiding beliefs of persons, groups, or institutions—have come to provide the ‘medium’ within which the self-government of the autonomous individual can be connected up with the imperatives of good government.” In ethopolitics, disputes over how “life itself” might be

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7. Rose, “Politics of Life Itself” (above, n. 6).
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 18.
valued are played out through the strategic handling of the biological identity of individuals—or somatic individuality, as Rose phrases it. This question—how life itself might be valued—is closely related to Joan’s and our question of “who has more life.” Hence this essay is infused with a logic that owes much to Rose’s concepts of ethopolitics and somatic individuality.

By pointing to our very biological existence, human beings, as individuals or collectively, claim certain universal rights like that of dignity, protection, and even treatment. Somatic individuals engage in the politics of the biosciences and form new interfaces between science and society, as many recent studies of patient movements have shown. The political dimension of such ethical claims will be, as found in the specific practices, forcing us to make “judgments about the relative and comparative ‘quality of life’ of differently composed human beings and of different ways of being human.”

Media stories of controversies over hESC research that we analyze in this essay are such specific practices in which judgments are made about the relative worth of different biological “humanities.”

Returning to Joan, we might use Rose’s concepts to say that by begging the viewers to decide who has more life, she engages in ethopolitics. She refers to her biological existence and the implicit rights for vitality that this is suggested to confer. However, the roles that the specificity of material bodies play within the hESC debates have not yet been investigated. The concept of the somatic individual holds that the body has not left the stage in biopolitics to give way to pure, abstracted values, but rather that the individual, somatic body has become a central way to embody or represent values. However, the concept does not specify which bodies get mobilized, how this happens, nor how judgments are made when comparing the values of specific embodied humanities. Looking at mobilizations and displays of particular bodies—those of children and celebrities—we will now turn to the hESC debates.


“Former Embryos”: U.S. President Bush and the hESC Controversy

Charis Thompson has argued that “in the United States the human embryo carries (in more legible form than most entities) active and latent meanings,” which relate especially to the tension this entity raises “between the sacred and the profane.” In the following, we will look at this tension between the sacred and the profane and how it was played out as issues of representation, when former U.S. president George W. Bush actively engaged in the question of hESC research.

The Snowflake Adoption Program

In August 2001, U.S. president George W. Bush released a press statement describing his doubts about hESC research. In particular, he addressed an ethical dilemma between supporting research directed “toward the greatest public good” on the one hand, and protecting the embryo “with the unique genetic potential of an individual human being” on the other. He mentioned the different actors with whom he discussed the matter: scientists, bioethicists, religious leaders, doctors, members of Congress and his cabinet, and friends. In particular, he mentioned diabetic children and former president Ronald Reagan, who was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease.

Some of the actors on Bush’s list claimed to speak for patients and their hopes for cures, while others claimed to speak for the embryo, the silent entity that in Bush’s account is portrayed as having unique (“like a snowflake”) potential for life. Bush concluded that as the president of the United States, he had “an important obligation to foster and encourage respect for life in America and throughout the world” and thus step forward as spokesperson for and protector of the embryo as “a sacred gift from our Creator.”

However, five months earlier, in March 2001, a small Christian “adoption” agency in California, Nightlight Christian Adoptions, had sued the U.S. government for harming its business through federal funding of hESC research. The agency claimed that such research

17. Ibid., pp. 10.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
that “destroyed” embryos to make stem-cell lines also “killed [the] pre-born children” that the agency would otherwise put up for “embryo adoption” through its Snowflake Adoption Program that had been operating since 1997. While making a legal claim about unjust competition over a specific biological resource—the estimated 400,000 “stock-piled” and cryopreserved embryos left over from IVF treatment—Nightlight Christian Adoptions also used ethopolitics by opening up the moral, scientific, and political controversies over the “liminal lives” of embryos. The embryos, which stem-cell scientists had argued to be “spare” and thus legitimately available for research, were here portrayed as “pre-born children” waiting to enter their predetermined trajectory of becoming children in loving families. Stem-cell research would thus not only be harmful to the agency’s business, but it would in effect amount to killing children, thus making the government an accomplice to child slaughter.

The imagery of the snowflake used in Bush’s press statement in August 2001 thus refers to the influence of Nightlight Christian Adoptions on the politics of hESC research and the turn toward a U.S.-government biopolitical agenda concerned with the representation of new scientific and moral entities such as embryos. The media stories portrayed the “Snowflake children” and their families, adding corporeality to the moral argument that embryos are the beginning of unique lives rather than a potent resource for medical research.

**President Bush’s Veto**

This corporeal representational practice of ethopolitics was further displayed in May 2005, when the U.S. House of Representatives proposed a bill that would increase funding for hESC research. In response, President Bush threatened to veto it if passed, which would be his first in the four years of his presidency. Despite this veto threat, the House passed the bill. This led Bush to say to reporters that “I’ve made it very clear to the Congress that the use of federal money, taxpayers’ money, to promote science which destroys life in order to save life—I’m against that. And therefore if the bill does that, I will veto it.”

In response to an accusation put forth by Democratic Representative Diane de Gette—that he was in effect withholding “cures to

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diseases for millions of Americans”\(^\text{23}\)—President Bush called a press conference in which, held in the Oval Office—the inner sanctum of U.S. presidential power—he appeared surrounded by children—not just any children, but Snowflake children, many wearing T-shirts saying “Former Embryo” (Fig. 1).

The invited families had “adopted” embryos from the Snowflake Adoption Program. Their children were the results of donated embryos produced by IVF and implanted into uteruses to become full-born children and representatives of a particular ethopolitics of “sacred gift[s] from our Creator.” Being physically present, these children were mobilized as political spokespersons with more authenticity and thus legitimacy to speak for the embryo than the representatives of the House. Through being engaged in this particular instance of ethopolitics, these children became socio-material nodal points in the unfolding biopolitical networks of hESC research. The *New York Times* reported the following about the press conference:

“The children here today remind us that there is no such thing as a spare embryo,” Mr. Bush said, amid the squeals and coos of babies cradled in their mother’s arms. “Every embryo is unique and genetically complete, like every other human being. And each of us started out our life this way. These lives are not raw material to be exploited, but gifts.”\(^\text{24}\)

The dismissal of the microscopic cluster of cells in a Petri dish as being not really human and “spare,” as did Joan, the multiple-sclerosis patient, is a forceful rhetorical device that circulates internationally in relation to the media coverage of hESC research.\(^\text{25}\) To counter this, Bush created a connection between these spare cells and living children, thereby showing that the cells were as authentically human as the Snowflake children. But these children add more than their bodies to the argument over who has more life: they embody unspecific potentiality and act as images of a common future and shared values. We will turn to this point in more detail below.

**Embryos and Patients**

It is very difficult to dismiss a young child suffering from a terrible disease on the grounds that help is unethical. It seems obviously unethical *not* to help. The patient-child is one of the most important

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23. Ibid.


25. For an example from the UK setting, see Williams, Kitzinger, and Henderson, “Envisaging the Embryo” (above, n. 3).
images in the stem-cell debate, as we shall see—so much so that it seems to be the paragon that others benchmark themselves against. Thus President Bush worked to make it clear that the embryos he defended were also children—though only very small ones.

The politics of stem cells confront representations of the not yet living—the embryo—with representations of the not yet dead—patients suffering from diseases that may one day be cured by means of stem-cell therapies. The embryo becomes a central actor to be spoken for in particular ways: as a “Petri-dish mass of cells” as Joan did, confronting it with her own embodied life, or as a sacred and vulnerable entity epitomizing life itself to be protected, as in Bush’s statement.

In what follows below, we will look at some of the bodies that challenge the embryo as the true representation of “life itself.” In his 2001 statement, Bush referred explicitly to suffering patients, thus acknowledging the power of somatic individuality as a political force in questions of biomedicine. When he mentioned diabetic children and former president Reagan, he pointed toward some of the specificities of somatic individuals engaged in ethopolitics. Some suffering bodies, such as the body of the child and the body of the celebrity, are different in their capacities as representatives of life itself. This is a central point of this essay.
Promise to Remember Me: The Bodies of Children

When George Bush mentioned children with juvenile diabetes in his 2001 statement, this related to the fact that diabetes is promoted by researchers as one of the illnesses that hESC research might benefit by discovering new and better treatments for it, or even a cure. Moreover, by using the word *juvenile*, Bush addressed a particular and highly influential biopolitical interest group: the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF).

*The Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation*

The JDRF has been a major actor in raising money for diabetes research both in the United States and elsewhere, and in lobbying for federal funding for research. The JDRF has also been very active in drawing attention to the potential of hESC research in discovering a cure for the disease, and in lobbying against the restrictions set by President Bush on federal funding for hESC research. It has been said about the organization that “[n]ot since AIDS activists stormed scientific meetings in the 1980s has a patient group done more to set the agenda of medical research.”

Rather than storming scientific meetings, the JDRF works in close partnership with researchers and also organizes groups of patients for different types of assemblies. In 2003, for instance, the second JDRF Children’s Congress was held in Washington, D.C., bringing 200 children to present testimony to U.S. senators about their lives with diabetes and their hopes for a cure (Fig. 2).

Again in 2005, JDRF children gathered, “championing their own cause,” to urge senators to make public funding available for hESC research. The children stood on the steps of the Capitol singing their theme song, “Promise to Remember Me,” on a carpet sat in front of senators, with adult representatives of JDRF—researcher Allen Spiegler, actress Mary Tyler Moore, Olympic gold-medalist Gary Hall Jr., and film producer Douglas Wick—at their back, and visited individual senators and representatives in their offices to question them about their stance on funding hESC research (Fig. 3).

*Immodest Witnesses*

In the congressional hearing, Gary Hall Jr. pointed to the diabetic children sitting in front and said that they were the future lawyers, doctors, and maybe even Olympic champions and senators of the

nation—thus at one and the same time he pointed to the present and undisputable reality of these children and their suffering and to their potentiality. They can become anything. The children were representatives of themselves, displaying their “realness.” “You are your own best lobbyists,” as Delaware congressman Mike Castle said, but they also embodied a potential and undetermined future. Stem cells were made to be a remedy in the unfolding of this potential future. Placing obstacles before this remedy amounted to preventing the children’s lives to unfold, much as hESC research was portrayed as preventing specific babies’ lives from unfolding in the Snowflake story.

Brown and Michael (2002) have argued that authenticity has been foregrounded as a central quality in representational practices concerned with the uncertain futures of biomedicine. The legitimacy of the actors coming forth in such debates depends not only and not primarily on their authority as experts, but more so on their ability to achieve “an authentic persona.” The individual, embodied child is authentic, in that it represents—to paraphrase Moreira and Pall-

28. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMhU0gDvYYw.
30. Ibid., p. 259.
dino—both “the ultimate truth and the greatest hope”: it is real and it is potential.31

The body assembly of the JDRF children confronts the political representation of interests (embodied in the congressmen) with an embodied representation of life itself: suffering, joy, hope, aspiration, as if they were representations, but without the “re—”—presentations without distortion or translation. In this particular setting they were being performed neither as members of an interest group nor as modest witnesses of scientific truth,32 but rather were performed as immodest bodies pleading for the right to keep on living, to have their lives recognized as valuable through their private testimonies and their weeping and laughing. Mobilizing their future and hopes in the present, they also created particular truths about hESC research, truths that are different from those of scientists speaking as modest witnesses of such research. The hopes of these children and the values inherent to their present and future lives are not outside the emergent truth of hESC research and the future of regenerative medicine; rather, “regimes of hope” and “regimes of truth” are


32. Haraway, Modest_Witness (above, n. 10).
parasitically related: they pave the way for research, and research paves the way for them (Fig. 4).

The JDRF children might be viewed as carrying particular representational power: they represent embodied suffering and unspecific potentiality at the same time. Berlant (2000) has also pointed to the use of the child in political claims as an emblem of insight about injustices yet uncorrupted by ideology, and links this figure to her notion of “national sentimentality” as a particular feature of what she terms the prevalent “testimonial culture” in the contemporary United States. As we have shown, the children’s embodied suffering is put on display, calling for empathy as the driver of political change.

Our Moment: The Bodies of Celebrities

Ronald Reagan

In 1994, it was announced that former U.S. president and national icon Ronald Reagan (Fig. 5) was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Years later, in June 2004, just before the Republican campaign for George W. Bush’s second term as president, the ninety-three-year-old Reagan passed away. His fatal illness had strange effects on the Republican presidential campaign of 2004. The U.S. Republican Party is traditionally associated with conservative values, especially when it comes to reproductive rights. It is firmly anti-abortionist and pro-life, opposing hESC research and like therapies. However, Reagan’s illness changed the mind of former First Lady Nancy Reagan, who asked President Bush to reverse his policies on limiting funding for stem-cell research. Months later, Americans witnessed the strange spectacle of Ron Reagan, Ronald and Nancy’s son, speaking at the national Democratic convention in support of the Democrat candidate, John Kerry, because Kerry supported hESC research whereas Bush, the Republican candidate, did not. Reagan ended his speech by saying

In a few months, we will face a choice. Yes, between two candidates and two parties, but more than that. We have a chance to take a giant stride forward for the good of all humanity. We can choose between the future and the past, between reason and ignorance, between true compassion and mere ideology. This is our moment, and we must not falter. Whatever else you do come November 2nd, I urge you, please, cast a vote for embryonic stem cell research.

33. Moreira and Palladino, “Between Truth and Hope” (above, n. 31).
Ron Reagan’s conception of the future is associated with “reason” and “true compassion.” He is indicating that the patients deserving true compassion are more true and authentic than embryos. In other words, he mobilizes the body of his father—once a great statesman, now destroyed by Alzheimer’s—and confronts this body with the microscopic cells in a Petri dish, much in the same way as Joan did in the television advertisement.

Meanwhile, movie star and new (2003) Californian governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was in favor of hESC research, and on 2 November 2004, 59 percent of Californians voted for California Proposition 71, which allocated $300 million for hESC research for ten years. The vote promised to make California one of the world’s leaders in hESC research. Former movie stars Christopher Reeve and Michael J. Fox backed the proposition, both morally and financially. Reeve was and Fox remains central actors in the U.S. stem-cell debate, because they were both celebrities and patients publicly testifying that stem-cell therapy was their only source of hope for recovering.

Christopher Reeve and Michael J. Fox

On 11 October 2005, Christopher Reeve, best-known for his role as Superman, died after being paralyzed for many years by a horseback-riding accident (Fig. 6). During his last years he was a very active and prominent spokesman for hESC research. Michael J. Fox
was at the height of his acting career when he developed Parkinson’s
disease. Reagan, Reeve, and Fox are important reasons why potential
future users of hESC research are often configured as patients suffer-
ing from Alzheimer’s (Reagan), paraplegics (Reeve), and Parkinson’s
(Fox), rather than, for instance, as patients with a cardiological dis-
ease—an area of hESC research in which several clinical trials are
being carried out on patients.

These celebrities have funded research and made their voices
heard and their bodies visible in politics. By supporting particular
parties in elections, they also ensure that stem-cell politics remains
a conspicuous agenda. The image of former Superman hero Reeve
strapped to his wheelchair has been presented in numerous media
stories regarding stem-cell research and the related political contro-
versies (Fig. 7). In these representations, the former idealized body
of Superman becomes displayed again, using many of the same
techniques, but now instead as a freakish body. This “double
objectification36 works to negate the primary objectification that made the star “unreal,” now making the freakish body into an icon of authenticity.

However, this authenticity is not necessarily unchallenged. In 2006, Fox’s Parkinson’s disease became an issue in the U.S. senate primary campaign in Missouri, when he supported the Democratic candidate, Clair McCaskill, because she was in favor of hESC research. The ensuing controversy is especially interesting, since it

comes to be about the body and authenticity. In his short televised statement in support of McCaskill, Fox was shown with violent tremors, and radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh later accused him of exaggerating his tremors or intentionally overmedicating himself to produce them “so you would really, really hate Republicans, because Republicans don’t want to cure it. . . . They’re happy, in fact, to see people suffer like Mr. Fox in his ad”37 (Fig. 8).

Limbaugh later apologized, thus confirming the body as a reality, which it is immoral to doubt. This resonates with an argument of Eileen Scarry’s (1985), who pointed out that the body in pain conveys both absolute certainty and absolute doubt, as no entity outside of the body can confirm the reality of pain. The inexpressibility of pain is also “pain’s triumph, for it achieves its aversiveness in part by

bringing about this absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the reality of other people.”

Suffering can neither be denied nor confirmed; when doubting other people’s bodily expressions of suffering, one doubts the overall authenticity of that individual. As expressed in the Washington Post after the Fox–Limbaugh episode: “Possibly worse than making fun of someone’s disability is saying that it’s imaginary. That is not to mock someone’s body, but to challenge a person’s guts, integrity, sanity.”

Still, it also points to the fragility of the authentic body as a representational form.

Celebrities, Blankness, and Authenticity

In the hESC debates, celebrities play a large role—as large a role as that played by politicians and experts. But why is that? Politicians have been accepted as speaking legitimately for certain interests, experts have their place as spokespeople of facts, but why and how do celebrities come to be spokespeople for values and emotions—for life itself?


Celebrities have often been described as being characterized by a screen-like blankness or as screens upon which the rest of us can project “[culturally]-specific ambiguities and contradictions.” At the same time, celebrity is a central platform for discussing authenticity in our culture. This is the crucial paradox of the celebrity: being both blank and authentic, general and specific. The celebrity is general and blank enough to work within practically any given context, yet is specific and authentic enough to actually work. As Thomsen states: “The metaphor of the celebrity consists of at least two levels: one that points back to the bodily source, represented by presence, a material ‘Ursprung,’ and one that points ‘forward’ toward an independent iconical value, an absence.” In other words, blankness and absence are not enough; the celebrity needs a material anchor, a body to ensure individuality, specificity, and authenticity. For the celebrity to work, it must be anchored in mundane, real-life “embodiedness.”

This embodiedness is strengthened when the body is not only alive and breathing, but ill and suffering—according to Scarry the ultimate sign of the real. The double character of the celebrity, being both image and reality, is heightened in the image of suffering. Thus in the stem-cell debates celebrities’ representational powers are strengthened, and the illnesses of Reeve and Fox make them stronger as representations rather than weaker. They are undeniable as somatic individuals though general enough to appeal and be relevant to all of us. In this, they resemble the children presented earlier, who had indisputable bodily reality and were potential and blank, characterized by what they could become rather than what they were.

Conclusion: Who Has More Life?

At the beginning of this essay, Joan asked a central question in an ethopolitics increasingly concerned with life itself: “Who has more life?” In response, we have suggested it is the certain actors that emerge as socio-material nodal points of the specific network of etho-

40. R. Barthes, Mytologier (1957; reprint, København: Nordisk Forlag).
41. C. Metz, The Imaginary Signifier (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
43. Ibid.
44. J. Gamson, Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
46. Scarry, Body in Pain (above, n. 38).
politics as it unfolds in stem-cell debates, and most particularly so in the U.S. debates. These actors provide us with two possible answers as to “who has more life?”: children and celebrities have more life. The Snowflake children have more life than both the 400,000 stockpiled embryos and the Christian and political spokespersons claiming to speak for them; the JDRF children have more life than the politicians, scientists, and adult representatives—even celebrities! And the celebrities have more life than other adult sufferers of particular illnesses.

But why do these bodies emerge as more valuable than others? There are so many obvious differences between children and celebrities—what is it that makes them both alike and effective in this particular context? The children and celebrities are characterized by having material bodies, just as the rest of us do. They are somatic individuals displaying the realness and authenticity of their existence. But their particular bodies also share characteristics that give them privilege over other bodies. We have argued that they share a form of blankness—a lack of distinguishing individual characteristics or features—and a potentiality, which is the ability to become something else, something more. Both children and celebrities work as idealized pictures, emptied of particularity, which means that more actors can attach and relate to them. Their embodiedness is undeniable and concrete, but they also embody future possibilities.

This argument indicates a temporal shift in relation to more general advances in science and technology, a shift from present or short-term implications toward more future-orientated abstractions. Thus by combining the reality of the suffering, somatic individual with blankness and potentiality, the child and the celebrity become more authentic representations than, for example, Joan, who only has individuality and suffering to offer, but who lacks the blankness and potentiality. In this, the child and the celebrity differ from the rest of us. Therefore both proponents and opponents of hESC research work hard to increase and strengthen their relations to children and celebrities, who become extremely important resources to mobilize in the rhetorical and material networks.

The representational force invested in celebrities and children is not unique to the stem-cell debate. It is a final point, however, that


they are indeed particularly apt as actors in regard to hESC research. Stem cells are defined precisely by being existing biological entities and by their potentiality, their ability to shift shape and become whichever cell in the body; they are, in a sense, the “blank domino” acutely calling for specification and fixation in something and someone that can provide them with real existence.

Children and celebrities can work as this something or someone, as they share the simultaneous materiality and blankness of the stem cell. This is the reason why the diverse networks involved in the U.S. hESC debates work to mobilize precisely these representations. Children and celebrities work as powerful icons in the general culture; but more than that, they share the paradox of being both reality and potentiality, blankness and matter, and individual and general with the stem cell.

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