

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

# NewPhilosopher

FAMILY  
MATTERS

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MARINA BENJAMIN  
My one and only

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NIGEL WARBURTON  
A family secret

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MAGGIE JACKSON  
Living with robots

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## Children Make Us Gods

By Mariana Alessandri

Men write books because they can't have babies, speculated the 25-year-old Rosario Castellanos in her philosophy master's thesis from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Mexican cultural production in 1950 was almost strictly the domain of men, to which Castellanos responded early on with her philosophy of "feminine culture," and later with poetry and novels. She contended that men replicate themselves in philosophy and art because they aren't godly enough to do so in the flesh. This jab could have been delivered by Castellanos' intellectual forerunner, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Mexican Hieronymite and poet philosopher Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, who protested her temporary sentence to life-with-no-books by insisting that you can find philosophy outside of books. She conjectured that Aristotle would have learned more if he'd spent time cooking in a kitchen. These two intellectuals reclaimed traditional women's work—reproduction and nourishment—by declaring it as valuable as the written word. Like babies, books are motivated by a God-complex.

One generation earlier than Castellanos, the Basque existentialist philosopher Miguel de Unamuno flaunted his omnipotence: he fathered ten children and wrote thirteen books. Unamuno's father died when he was six, which likely prompted what he called an "immortal yearning for immortality," and he lost one child to meningitis, which likely reinforced it. "Nothing is real that is not eternal," Unamuno wrote in *Tragic Sense of Life*, his William James-inspired philosophical treatise justifying a (religious) belief in immortality. In this book he argued that our earthly creations are a desperate denial of our impending death. Unamuno believed that our short lives are spent regenerating, replicating, and reproducing ourselves in so many ways as a refusal to let go. Culture, so it seems, is life's hangnail. He names ancestor worship as one way of paying ourselves forward. If I pray to and for my ancestors, the gambler bets, future generations will do the same for me. A cousin of the sentiment that Castellanos would later adopt, Unamuno declared in 1913 that we have babies to perpetuate ourselves, which is either the laziest or most industrious way to do it. Made in our image, children make us gods.

Since I only had two kids, you could accuse me of not craving immortality as badly as Unamuno. But Castellanos would still place her bet on me, on account of having used my own vagina. Those who can't or won't have kids, Unamuno asserts, come up with creative ways of making sure that history doesn't clip them. The arts are a perfect example of self-perpetuation: writing, painting, sculpting and

singing “leave behind a shadow of [our] spirit, something that may survive [us].” But there are others: we argue, we play, we make love, all for the sake of memorializing ourselves. These, especially the last, he calls forms of resistance to the vanity of the passing world. For Unamuno, “Whosoever loves another wishes to eternalize himself in him.” But it goes the other way, too. Herostratus provides Unamuno counterintuitive evidence of the ubiquitous thirst for eternity. Here’s a man who burned down the temple of Artemis to thwart oblivion, and thanks to him we have the term *erostratismo*, which Unamuno equates with the need to be remembered. Plain old vanity is a relatively faint echo of this same desire. Indeed, even suicides are evidence to Unamuno of his thesis: the hungriest souls plunge themselves into eternity so forcefully that it kills them. Reading Unamuno’s novela *San Manuel Bueno, Martir* makes one wonder if Unamuno himself didn’t have the same suicidal ideations as his protagonist.

Unamuno’s attempts to scale the wall of immortality are impressive. As a hedge against loss despite his twenty-three lucky charms, Unamuno wrote himself into his novel *Niebla*, playing an author who receives a visit from his protagonist, Agosto. In the exchange, author and character debate whether a protagonist can kill himself or whether the house always wins. Agosto’s death is punctuated by this question mark, since we never find out if he ate himself to death or if Don Miguel force fed him. We want to be the gods of our lives, Unamuno insisted, creating and destroying at whim, keeping an eye on the cardsharp of obscurity. Unamuno the author died in 1936, but his character is immortal.

Though I’ve generated offspring—and even given them my last name—they may or may not pull through for me. The forgotten folks must either have had deadbeat children or were not worth remembering. Not inclined to gamble, I seek a little insurance. I’ve not yet written any books, because although I found great midwives for the real deal, I’ve not yet found a Socrates who could handle delivering my meconium-covered ideas or my insistence on doing so naturally. I think it’s harder to make books than babies, but I’m inclined to agree with Unamuno that we long to leave our scent in the world. Writers itch to say something meaningful, to do work that matters, like Mexican American philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa urged us to, *porque vale la pena* (because it’s worth it.)

As risk-averse as I am, it’s time to get working on something lasting. If we listen to Unamuno and Castellanos, a good way to avoid oblivion is to make a contribution. If I can write books even half as human as babies, I will have begun. If I can pass down to my children a love of music, art and literature, as well as cooking, baseball, and boardgames, then I’m halfway there. And if I can offer them a critical eye with which to judge and improve their culture, then I’m closer still. But if books are babies, like Castellanos suggests, then culture becomes a family affair. Art, science, music, mathematics, religion,

politics: these are our tíos y tías, elders and juniors. Like flesh-and-bone relatives, we don't have to like them, but we should recognize them publicly and not skip family reunions. As a reward for showing up, I get to judge my Silicon Valley "neighbors" who create the predatory screens and gadgets as harshly as I do my real neighbors who helplessly surrender their kids to them. It's up to us to make good art, as author Neil Gaiman commands – ditto for technology – just as it is to raise a generation of thoughtful and critical human beings. We owe our lives to our biological, ecological, and sociological families, so we should, in turn, cultivate the fertile ground out of which our kids and culture can emerge.

If Unamuno is right, it starts small, through writing and reproduction and a concern for personal immortality. But if we acknowledge that raising kids and raising culture are joint projects, then our desire for personal immortality could grow into a concern for the whole family. Once we discover that legacies are not individually earned, we'll begin to recognize one another as collaborators rather than competitors. In this scenario, we're all pitching in to fashion the family crest. If we who contribute *criaturas* and *cultura* [kids and culture] take responsibility for them out of love and a commitment to a shared future, then we will have accomplished something which few families do. We will have forged a shared legacy.