

So You Wanna Be A Cyborg Mommy? Queer Identity and the New Reproductive Technologies

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I remember the first time I fell in love with a cyborg. I was eight years old and, of course, she wasn't really a cyborg. However, Juno, the plastic woman of Amazon proportions, was human enough for my sensibilities and she set my neurons a-snapping. It was on a second-grade field trip to the Health Museum that I discovered her in all her electric glory. An *überfrau* model of human anatomy, she spun slowly on a pedestal, her insides pulsing and even speaking. Suddenly it sickened me to imagine my own interior to be dark and slimy instead of blessed with blinking lights. I knew then that Juno was the kind of woman for me.

At the time I did not know—though I might have guessed—that at the turn of the twenty-first century, I would place myself in close context to Juno. Although I am still 99.8 percent biological, I believe the omnipresence of technological intervention in daily life implies conscription into the ranks of cyborg status. As women and men of a computerized society, we have long passed the critical juncture of accepting or rejecting cyborg identity. We are deeply embedded in a culture that often does not offer us alternatives to technologically mediated reality. In her oft cited “A Cyborg Manifesto,”¹ Donna Haraway asserts that “the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world.” Gender identity remains, however, a large thorn in the side of those who wish to transcend the

systematic categorization of the techno-science culture,

Reproduction is a particularly potent jumping-off place for a search for identity. Haraway's utopian cyborg does not validate heterosexual sex as reproductively necessary, thereby widening the scope of fecund events to include those that are technologically mediated. The innovations in assisted reproductive technologies (ART) are a useful avenue for people who cannot or do not wish to create kinship in the biologically ordained way. It is through ART that queer identity has been linked to reproductive desires. Finally, those women and men who wish to build alternative kinship models have the available tools to do so outside the dominant societal structure of family. The terms "gay" and "family" are no longer mutually exclusive.

The search for a queer identity within the clinical research designed for heterosexual, middle-class, white infertile couples requires subversive attitudes and actions. There is a necessity of conscious language in order to validate experiences that fall outside the status quo and which begin to re-write the syntax of family make-up. Kinship is a fluid term, and while historically it has specified blood relations, it does not necessarily limit itself to this category. Rayna Rapp writes, "When we assume male-headed, nuclear families to be central units of kinship, and all alternative patterns to be extensions or exceptions, we accept an aspect of cultural hegemony instead of studying it."² I would add the necessity of actively questioning it as well.

This is precisely the argument for the use of ART by gays and lesbians who wish to parent. Although financial determinants still play a large role in access to services, the rhetoric of familial relationship has already been changed by the dominant group of ART users. The ART encourage reproduction through "cyborgification" and can, therefore, be more easily appropriated by lesbian and gay families wishing to have children. The physical body is the locus where the ART are engaged. The context of their placement is dependent upon a long history of what Haraway refers to as the "informatics of domination." This system of networks replaces the old mode of hierarchical domination with an information system which cannot be coded as natural. It is no less threatening, however.

Our perception of reality is filtered through the lens of technology. A controlled environment and control of the environment are primary societal desires. The unwavering faith mainstream society places in our computer-generated reality is clearly connected to the instances of technological intervention in pregnancy and birth. A woman undergoing an ultrasound is encouraged by the technician to bond with her fetus through the image on the monitor. Because she sees the fetus on the screen, everything is supposed to be okay. Her knowledge of her body is supplanted by the reality of the present technology.

We have been ushered into unquestioned acceptance of a specific kind of information, technological data, which is presented as absolute truth. Recent feminist theorists, such as Sandra Harding and Emily Martin, have finally broken through the rhetoric of technological complacency. Their work has disproved the concept of science as value-free, and more importantly, questioned it as a useful methodology. Harding writes, “though scientific methods are selected, we are told, exactly in order to eliminate all social values from inquiry, they are actually operationalized to eliminate those values that differ within whatever gets to count as the community of scientists.”³

The compulsory cyborg citizenship of the twenty-first century offers choices in representation and realization, if only we know how to see them. The post-modern notion of cyborg is radically different from its original form in science fiction. No longer simply a physical being with mechanical and biological parts, the cyborg has become the representative, even a metaphor, of a spectrum of technologically mediated identities and lifestyle choices. The notion of a genderless cyborg seems to be coupled in popular culture with the over-sexualized robot, which is usually female, but does not carry the equipment for sexual intercourse. Takashi Murakami’s sculpture *Hiropon*, which is Japanese slang for heroin, depicts such a cyborg, naked, lacking genitals, and spurting copious amounts of breast milk. She is a fantasy, able to nurture without the threat of reproductive capacity. Sharply in contrast with the buxom abundance of this figure, the familiar C3PO of “Star Wars” fame prefers friendship with other robots, and has been given a slight British accent to seem intelligent, or

perhaps, prudish. Neither the androgynous cyborg nor its feminine *doppelgänger* present biological reproduction as a strategy for fecundity. Technology now offers a variety of options for offspring through cloning, self-replication, and ART.

It is within these cyborg identities, which are touted as superior to biological existence, that we can begin to construct alternatives to the informatics of domination. By its very existence as flesh/machine, the cyborg is a hybrid creature. It exists in many realms, not all of which are benign. This allows for conscious creation of syntax and action in many avenues of technological progress. The ART are particularly relevant in the delineation of new approaches to kinship models. Our society's trust in science and technology has allowed those couples who are infertile to seek an alternative which is touted to be superior to the act of sexual intercourse in assuring offspring.

The development of ART has led to a less stable definition of filial relationships. Language is one of the main issues of confusion regarding offspring produced through ART. Those who consider themselves "other," be it for racial, sexual, or economic reasons, can use this confusion to create new paradigms of language for identification as kin. For example, the abbreviation 'AI' commonly stands for "artificial insemination," but is referenced as "alternative insemination" by almost all queer parents. Because ART were developed for white heterosexual couples with infertility issues, the need for different kinship models has required new definitions of "family" to be accepted. It has, in effect, been normalized to indicate a whole range of actual relationships.

For example, in her essay "Quit Sniveling, Cryobaby..."⁴ Charis Cussin uses the terms "opaque" and "transparent" to indicate the relationships to a developing fetus. An egg donor may be excluded, i.e., transparent, from the pregnancy of a woman whose own eggs are damaged. Likewise, the egg donor might be seen as the "real mother," i.e., opaque, if she is paying to have her eggs gestated in another woman's uterus. The contextual meaning of the terms speaks to the nature of the new cyborg family.

Before the development of ART, queer families consisted primarily of children from previous heterosexual unions, and those conceived through sexual

intercourse. Today, however, these methods seem distasteful compared with the technological options. There are increasing numbers of donor banks that cater to queer families, many of which will ship sperm in liquid nitrogen right to your home. Also, agencies exist which put gay men into contact with willing surrogate mothers, help with non-traditional adoptions (i.e., not a married heterosexual couple), and find sperm donors of specific sexual preference, ethnic background, or educational level.

While many lesbian moms rely on male friends as co-parents, legal control of a child's well-being is often the reason lesbians choose anonymous sperm donors. As Kath Weston describes in her book *Families We Choose*, AIDS also plays an important role in ART choices in the last two decades. Many queer people, specifically women seeking donors, are comforted by pre-tested sperm-bank material. The uncertainty of HIV status prohibits both men and women from making use of sperm that does not come from a bank. Most see the sperm as merely a tool toward a specific goal, e.g., conception, and very rarely refer back to the man who once produced the genetic material. When known-donor sperm is used, however, most queer women prefer a gay or bisexual man, perhaps because he is already outside the informatics of domination in terms of normative heterosexual reproductive relations.

Access to information and services is often the root of distress for queer families wishing to use ART to create a family. There is a clear lack of support for people outside the status quo who wish to parent. Gay and lesbian couples or individuals who want to have children must often circumvent the existing system in order to have their wishes fulfilled. For example, many gay men seek out surrogate mothers through private means, because mainstream agencies refuse to put them in contact with such women. However, according to documented interviews, many surrogate mothers are quite willing to perform their services for gay men, already having placed themselves outside the biologically reproductive norm.

Most queer parenting books⁵ spend a number of chapters discussing the role assignments of parents and various support people. Because of the biological improbability of an accidental pregnancy, there is a certain luxury of

pre-conception planning. This allows each person involved in the family to have a clear idea of her/his role in the child's life. For example, a lesbian couple might invite a close friend to provide a "male role model" for their child, but be clear about the limits of his authority in parenting. Unlike a father who has biological ties to the child, the women can be in full control of the male's presence in the family organization.

The definition of family roles by queer parents is as individual as the families themselves. Studies have shown, however, that although a small child might have a variety of people in her/his life, there is rarely any confusion among them. In the same way that most children have no trouble differentiating between their sets of grandparents, so most do not have difficulty with the concept of two mothers, two fathers, or some other combination of care-takers. In reality, most children in America today do not grow up in a household with two biological parents of opposite sex either.

Problems arise for queer families with kinship creation because although the ART are hidden measures, the family will "look abnormal." Adoption, although not a technological intervention, is often denied to queer parents, and those approaching an agency often do so as single parents. Because of a queer family's visibility as "other," there are huge challenges in surmounting the societal construction of the nuclear family norm. Under the best of circumstances, use of ART by queer families positively undermines the dominant construction of kinship.

The importance of financial accountability, i.e., payment for services, is at the forefront in determination of kinship structures. Families are becoming amalgamations of technological and organic elements, and informed choice is centrally relevant. Legally binding agreements, which attempt to protect non-biological relationships, are commonplace among queer families who have made a commitment to co-parenting. While no law exists to date that will guarantee a non-biological parent rights to a child, second-parent adoption has become a reasonable measure of security for a queer family. Unfortunately, a court of law can still deny the validity of the agreement. The desire to be recognized as a "normal" family has been the source of contention in the queer

community. As with marriage rights, some people do not feel that buying into the heterosexual status quo is the answer.

Thankfully, within the queer community there is more acceptance now of individuals who wish to parent. Contemporary queer theory does not discredit gays and lesbians who want children. They are no longer accused of wanting to imitate the “hetero breeders.” In her personal memoirs, feminist Cherríe Moraga writes “I know that blood quantum does not determine parenthood any more than it determines culture. Still, I know blood matters. It just doesn’t matter more than love.”⁶ In part, is it due to the ART, which make it possible to use the words “gay” and “family” together to make a “gay family.” It is encouraging to know support systems are being placed for queer families. There are a number of useful publications, periodicals and web sites, such as *Gay Parent* magazine, *Alternative Families* magazine and <<http://www.gayparenting.com>>. There is room, in this cyborg society, to accept all sorts of people who wish to create families outside the prescribed suburban picket fence reality.

More than any other type of identity, that of the human as a flesh/machine amalgamation is the most truthful to our twenty-first century existence. The reasons for living in a border region between biology and technology are many, and the outcome likewise unwritten. Because it is only in the last few decades that such technologically mediated reality has been placed into our hands, it is difficult to predict its effects. The cyborg has no original language. It must be manufactured consciously, in the same way a queer family constructs kinship. It is located at an intersection of experiences, full of possibility and choice. While technology has been created by the informatics of domination, it no longer refers directly back to its patrilinear roots. Our conscription into the ranks of the cyborg allows us the creativity to defy nature. We are no longer simply biological creatures. Likewise, we are no longer bound by biological rhetoric. It is language which must be subverted in order to effect change.

Nearly twenty years after my first meeting with Juno, the beautiful plastic woman, I still remember the necessity I felt to understand her origin and purpose. Now I know that she was fabricated as a teacher, to laud the extent to which science has dissected the human body. However, the fact that I see

something different in her; something much more subversive, betrays her creators. Juno has no male consort, no biological counterpart twirling next to her, and yet her gravid womb lights up with the potential for positive change. We can become like her, carrying our ideas of kinship to full term. It begins with acknowledging those people in our lives to whom we are not tied by blood, but who mean so much to our well being. It begins by consciously choosing our families, by calling ourselves new names, by appropriating patriarchal symbols and structures and rebuilding them to suit our own needs. It begins by supporting local agencies, either financially or emotionally, which help those outside the biologically reproductive norm gain access to ART and adoption services. It can even begin with something as simple as a word of encouragement to a friend who is considering single parenthood. The avenues are many, and the results are equally myriad, shimmering with a new generation of children who no longer are pressured by the constraints of the nuclear family structure.

When the museum finally relieves Juno of her pedestal duties, I want to put her in my front yard as a new kind of holy nativity, blinking and spinning, as a testimony to the possibility of the cyborg that cannot be predicted by science, and which resides in all of us as subversive intention and action. ★

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- 1 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. (New York: Routledge, 1991).
 - 2 Rayna Rapp, "Toward a Nuclear Freeze? The Gender Politics of Euro-American Kinship Analysis." In J.F. Collier and S.J. Yanagisako, eds., *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 129.
 - 3 Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 41.
 - 4 Charis Cussin, "Quit Sniveling, Cryobaby..." Robbie Davis-Floyd and Joseph Dumit, eds., *Cyborg Babies: From Techno-sex to Techno-tots* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
 - 5 An excellent source is Merilee Clunis D. and G. Dorsey Green, *The Lesbian Parenting Handbook: A Guide to Creating Families and Raising Children* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1995).
 - 6 Cherrie Moraga, *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood* (Ithaca: Firebrand, 1997).