

WGSS 340: Feminist and Queer Theory
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Laura Goetz

Congratulations, It's a Social Construct: Production and Reproduction of (Trans)Gendered Bodies
by Laura Goetz

“I came as close today as I’ll ever come to giving birth—literally. My body can’t do that: I can’t even bleed without a wound, and yet I claim to be a woman” Susan Stryker, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix*, p. 246

In 1994, transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker grappled with the biological reality of her own womanhood in *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix*. Stryker identifies with Mary Shelley’s monster—a surgically-constructed being, an embodied conflict of science and nature. As a trans woman, she becomes exceedingly aware that she achieved “the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process” (Stryker, 240) when watching her lesbian partner give birth to their daughter; at the end of the day Stryker was heart-broken and felt lacking because her body could not carry a child. Stryker felt a personal loss for never being able to achieve that “natural” female experience. While her daughter’s birth was an attempt to “reclaim biological reproduction from heterosexism” (Stryker, 245), Stryker’s feelings of personal exclusion suggest that it failed. In this analysis I will consider the societal role of medically produced bodies that cannot reproduce biologically, and to resolve possible ways that production in itself might be considered a form of alternative reproduction.

In “The Dialectic of Sex,” Shulamith Firestone argues that biological differences form the foundation of societal sexism and only overcoming nature with technology can end female oppression. While Firestone wrote this text in 1970, her concept can be retroactively reread in light of Stryker’s scholarship and expanded to consider general gender-based oppression as well.

Firestone's theory is based on the assumption that bodies have a biological gender. She claims that women and men are biologically different and that those physical dissimilarities intrinsically define feminism as a struggle to change "a fundamental biological condition" (Firestone, 19) because, "natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labor at the origins of class" (Firestone, 23). Using her framework, patriarchy stems from biology, and yet, this definition of oppression excludes trans identity both from the domains of natural and from coexisting with "woman" and "man," which Firestone equates with reproductive capacity.

However, Firestone's plan for using technology to transcend inequality quickly suggests a more inclusive liberation. She wants technology to replace women's role in carrying and delivering babies to eliminate a disproportionate labor distribution. To that end, she calls for the creation of "artificial reproduction," which would allow children to "be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either" (Firestone, 25). While Firestone's dream for alternatives to heteronormative reproduction is presented as a future in which women achieve social equality through biological revolution, her utopian vision can be interpreted differently with large implications for trans lives. For indeed, as Stryker suggests in her anecdote, equating biological childbearing with womanhood not only disempowers those executing that type of forced labor, but additionally sets up an exclusionary dichotomy that prevents trans individuals from ever truly embodying their gender identity.

While intended to open up new opportunities for women freed from evolutionary biological expectations, Firestone's utopian vision could realize Stryker's dream. However by doing so, it would solidify Stryker's claim to femininity by stabilizing a procreative definition of woman. Firestone anticipates this criticism when she contemplates how social meanings assigned

to biological difference often dictate power dynamics, regardless of reproductive status. She argues, “the end goal of feminist revolution must be... not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally” (Firestone, 24-25). The practical implications of such a grand theoretical claim are unclear. If genital differences did not matter culturally, would they still matter personally? Do transgender people decide to undergo gender-affirming surgery to construct a culturally-legible body, or a personally-comfortable one? Are those necessarily mutually exclusive?

Regardless, such a deconstruction of biological determinism of social expectations would not change the fact that Stryker could not deliver a baby. Therefore a more useful query might be: if not a baby, what can a transgender body produce? As they are already in opposition with “nature,” conceptualizing those bodies as technology is an interesting starting place for tackling that question. In her essay, Stryker states frankly, “The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction” (Stryker, 238). That language echoes Donna Haraway’s in the 1987 text, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*. Haraway abstractly defines a cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway, 65). Her discourse quickly implies a new way of conceptualizing trans bodies and their reproductive potential when she states, “modern medicine is also full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine...in an intimacy and with a power that was not generated in the history of sexuality” (Haraway, 66). By describing this melding of person and plastic favorably in opposition to heteronormative procreation, Haraway suggests the radical potential of moving away from the “natural.” She takes this a step further by asserting that “machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and

externally-designed” (Haraway, 69). Here Haraway claims that the creation of cyborgs has destabilized the foundational dichotomies between nature and technology and physical and psychological. This implies the powerful potential of transgender self-creation to contribute to achieving Firestone’s utopia. However, with her third pairing Haraway diverges from the earlier call for artificial, genderless reproduction. By erasing the line dividing “self-developing” and “externally-designed,” Haraway suggests a transgender production of the self can be equally important to (if not stronger than) heteronormative procreation.

Utilizing that framework, could the process of making a transsexual body a cyborg also be considered a form of queer (re)production? Returning to her literary analogy, Susan Stryker says yes:

“The consciousness shaped by the transsexual body is no more the creation of the science that refigures the flesh than the monster’s mind is the creation of Frankenstein. The agenda that produced hormonal and surgical sex reassignment techniques is no less pretentious, and no more noble, than Frankenstein’s... As we rise up from the operating tables of our rebirth, transsexuals are something more, and something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be” Stryker p. 242-243.

When Stryker employs the term “rebirth,” the image she describes post-surgery forms an interesting juxtaposition with the earlier scene in the hospital with her partner. While her partner executed *reproduction* by giving *birth* to their daughter, Stryker classifies the surgical *production* of her trans body as *rebirth*. This terminological inversion shifts the “re” from producing life to becoming life, meaning that while Stryker’s trans identity prevented her from propagating the human race *de novo*, it enabled her to create her own gendered body and with it a new start to life.

Yet, despite Stryker’s consistencies with the cyborg framework, Haraway would take issue with naming that production as a “rebirth.” To Haraway “reproductive politics” evoke associations with “rebirth without flaw, perfection, abstraction” (Haraway, 96), which is

inherently at odds with the oppositional, piecemeal cyborg. Instead she claims an alternate story—not of new life, but of healing.

“[C]yborgs have more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and of most birthing... The regrown limb can be monstrous, duplicated, potent. We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender” Haraway p. 100

Invoking language of “regeneration” instead of rebirth, Haraway presents an alternate narrative of transgender production, even farther from procreative norms. Like Stryker, she not only draws on language of monstrosity, but also presents the monstrous in an implicitly positive and powerful light. Haraway’s utopia is monstrous because she sees the radical potential of incomplete regeneration, regeneration that fails to reproduce the original, and instead produces an entirely new aspect to the previously existing being.

If Stryker were to accept and embrace her self-proclaimed monstrosity, what would it mean to give up striving for natural and instead work to reclaim, reform, regenerate her own real gendered body? Jean Bobby Noble’s 2012 *Our Bodies Are Not Ourselves* addresses this when he reaffirms and further radicalizes a cyborg exploration of the social meaning of physically transforming trans bodies. Acknowledging the severe biomedical inadequacies of penis-building surgery and extreme economic barriers to accessing the services that are theoretically available, Noble, like Stryker, grapples with being unable to achieve any sort of naturalized gender. To Noble, this biological constraint means that “trans men cannot leave the ‘trans’ behind and be ‘men’” (Noble, 80). This linguistic limitation results in the self-creation of a new being altogether that is “half guy, half something else” (Noble, 80). This internal disjunction is again reminiscent of Haraway’s cyborg, and Noble strengthens that parallel by pointing out that regardless of surgical or chemical modifications, trans bodies can be altered, but never

exchanged for “new bodies” altogether (Noble, 83). Instead of working in the rhetoric of “transition,” Noble conceptualizes reconstructing his gender presentation in the same language as was used when he reconstructed his chest—“grafting.” Just as his nipples now are the same nipples he had before his double mastectomy, just reconfigured and reattached, he explains, “My *gender* now looks different from the one I grew up with but my body is, paradoxically, almost still the same” (Noble, 83). Like Stryker, Noble stood up from the operating table a cyborg, but he further radicalizes that identity by drawing attention to the fact that his monstrosity is not a transition, but a reconfiguration of his preexisting, apparently “natural,” self.

By acknowledging the social instability of assigning gender and simultaneous temporal stability of the body itself, Noble presents grafting as the foundation for producing not only monstrous bodies, but new queer identities as well. He argues that “intelligibility for the female-to-male trans-sexual man means contesting the alignment of bodies, genders, and sexualities to force a crisis by grafting articulations onto each other” (Noble, 84). Grafting in this sense creates radical hegemonic possibilities. As with Stryker’s dilemma about womanhood and pregnancy, if manhood is equated with a certain appearance below the belt, Noble will always be lacking and can never be male. However, by proposing the concept of grafting alternative physiological and social combinations for a trans embodiment, Noble resolves some of Stryker’s perceived inadequacies. Noble suggests that for trans people, a process of “self-remaking” (Noble, 83) to change the gendered legibility of their bodies can produce new identities, categories, and subjectivities; he can identify as a “lesbian man.” Extending the concept of the transsexual cyborg to construct new labels to describe alternative embodiments in this way suggests a radical potential to produce new societal understandings of gender. Indeed to Noble, this creation of “something else outside of our sexual vocabularies and grammars” is in fact a form of “queer

reproduction” (Noble, 83). Using semantic grafting to break away from naturalized identity labels and ways of linguistically conceptualizing gendered bodies, trans cyborgs become able to rhetorically realize Haraway’s vision and regenerate (monstrous and powerful) instead of simply reproducing the status quo.

This alternative to reproduction is not based in sutures and silicone. Just as no surgery could have enabled Stryker to carry and deliver her daughter, no doctor could have generated the subversive potential of her embodied existence. Stryker ends up reconciling her biological reality when she allows herself to be angry about it. When she declares, “In birthing my rage/my rage has rebirthed me” (Stryker, 248), Stryker alludes to the productive power of embodied experience. She explains, “by mobilizing gendered identities and rendering them provisional, open to strategic development and occupation, this rage enables the establishment of subjects in new modes, regulated by different codes of intelligibility” (Stryker, 249). This presents rage as the first step to destabilizing physical and semantic gender and creating Noble’s suggested alternate identities and subjectivities.

Stryker further suggests that the biological limits of her gendered body might fuel this performance of anger, and with it her self-production. She asserts, “Through the operation of rage, the stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power” (Stryker, 249). Her choice of “transforming” instead of “transitioning” evokes both Haraway’s concept of regeneration and Noble’s understanding of grafting. In the implied framework, rage has the potential to graft her exclusion and hurt from feeling like unnatural womanhood into a potent, strong monstrosity. Personal rage both adopts the power of the surgical knife and allows the individual to retain agency in that transformative process. When she ends with a rallying cry, “May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world” (Stryker,

251), Stryker reveals the possibility of expanding self-creation as an alternative to reproduction into a strategy for reshaping the world as well. This hope blends an acceptance of biological restraints with a reformulated dream of producing external lasting change and by doing so offers a radical potential for giving birth to something new, outside of heterosexism.

References:

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