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Book Review

Cyborg Babies: From Techno-Sex to Techno-Tots.
Robbie Davis-Floyd and Joseph Dumit, eds.

Probably the most significant engagement with the cultural discourse of the “cyborg” began with Donna Haraway, whose scintillating exercise of the term occurred first in a paper entitled, “New machines, New bodies, New Communities: Political Dilemmas of a Cyborg Feminist.” This paper was encompassed by Haraway’s published essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” which appeared in her 1991 book Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. Nearly a decade has passed between Haraway’s work and the appearance of Cyborg Babies.

Davis-Floyd and Dumit organize this collection of sixteen essays into four thematics to stabilize the term “cyborg” in an empirical anthropological context, “from the beginning (birth) to the reproduction of culture in the raising of cyborg babies” (13-14). Grafting the selections together is an overt engagement with Haraway’s notion of the “cyborg” as a “cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (149). There is significant dialogue across the selections in this collection as well: for example, “Native Narratives of Connectedness: Surrogate Motherhood and Tech-
nology," by Elizabeth Roberts in part three, questions the ideal of the biological model of motherhood occurring in “Quit Sniveling, Cryo-Baby. We’ll Work Out Which One’s Your Mama,” by Chris Cussins in part one, while concurrently extending Cussins’s discussion of the promise of surrogacy in the reworking of cultural understanding of kin relations.

The contributing authors engage a fabulous array of methodology: ethnography, participant-observation, fiction, anecdotal, firsthand experience, and discourse analysis. The selections pull, prod, and peel apart the cultural construction of reproduction, birth, technology, technoscience, and “ideas about self and life in the culture of simulation” (the subtitle of Sherry Turkle’s chapter: “Cyborg Babies and Cy-Dough-Plasm”). One of my favorites, “Natural Love,” by Janet Isaacs Ashford, is a subtle, fictionalized account of love, lovemaking, and birth that astutely delimits the possibilities of technological mediation in human relations. In the end, this collection highlights fissures in the usually dyadic relationship of nature: culture, re-interrogating human identity and embodiment to offer openings for resistance and subversive possibility through conversations about technology and human perseverance.

My greatest criticism would be that while the opportunity for new understandings of the “cyborg” are cultivated in essays which, for the most part are very strong, inventive, thought-provoking and rather informative concerning reproductive “technoscience," there is significant slippage in the introduction by Davis-Floyd and Dumit in their use of the term “postmodern.” This slippage recurs as a motif in some of the essays that follow the tone established by the editors as a reference point, vis-à-vis using “the postmodern” as a framework for their research or conclusions. Granted, the terms “the postmodern” are rather overburdened in nearly all contemporary social theoretical engagements; but, to demand that a text deal with both “the postmodern” and the “cyborg” is rather an extreme, and perhaps unrealistic task.

Nonetheless, encountering “the postmodern” diffusely engaged as a moniker for present times, “niche markets” and “birth control” (85), as a description of a new anthropology, and as a means to describe late-Capitalist accumulation was rather disconcerting, ultimately undermining the overall strength of this collection. I am curious as to why the collection editors did not emphasize the task of stabilizing the term “cyborg” across many contexts as a means to unbundle their suggestion of “a postmodern anthropology” (14). However, such a task may have highlighted that often, words are neither nimble nor quick, detracting, in the end, from the text’s main thematic and its marked intersection with the research of all contributing authors.

When considered as a whole, Cyborg Babies is an important contribution to contemporary discussions about embodiment and technology. Not surprisingly, the discourse of the “cyborg” has morphed since the contents of Cyborg Babies became frozen in the long publication process. The most recent addition to the “cyborg” discourse not included in this collection is the “post-human” art movement that explores: “the increasingly fuzzy boundary between technology and the biological body” whereby “According to the post-human pundits, technology will usher a superior life for our species. Through technology, we will no longer be limited by the spatial and temporal limits of our corporeal self” (Asma, B17).

My reading and interrogation of this collection occurred during the pregnancy and birth of my first child, Ziggy. Throughout the many engagements with the industrial, medical complex in Lexington, Kentucky, I often felt like an anthropologist on Mars (to use the words of Oliver W. Sachs). This collection provided a spirited alternative to most of the contemporary literature on birth and pregnancy, which is often rhetorically formulated as ‘how to’ and/or ‘what to expect’ handbooks that are fully entrenched in modern notions of pregnancy-as-pathology.

Notes

1. This paper was presented at “The Scholar and the Feminist X: The Question of Technology,” Conference, Barnard College, New York City, April 1983. (Haraway 243).

Works Cited

