Unnatural Mothers, Mothering Unnaturally: Technologies of Reproduction and the Politics of Maternity in Hiromi Goto's *Hopeful Monsters*

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Abstract

Through scientific discourse and reproductive technologies, the reproductive body and the maternal body continue to be constructed as 'natural'. At the same time, these technologies have begun to blur the boundaries between what is considered an acceptable reproductive body, and consequently an acceptable maternal body, and an unnatural or a socially undesirable one. As science purports to offer women greater control over how and when they choose to procreate, through methods which range between delaying or eliminating the possibility of contraception to those which extend the possibility of conception to post-menopausal or infertile women, these same procedures raise questions about the nature and 'naturalness' of reproduction. Added to these concerns are the suitability of the reproductive body as a maternal body. Consequently, and more and more frequently, bodies which defy ideals about maternity and motherhood emerge, and questions about what it means to mother are raised. Bodies which contest the construction of motherhood as natural are frequently represented as monstrous or freakish, and the debate between science and nature is heightened. Hiromi Goto's short story 'Hopeful Monsters' resists the construction of the 'natural' maternal body by highlighting the way in which women's bodies are shaped by scientific discourse. In turn, images of 'monstrous' mothers emerge and are challenged, suggesting the need to reimagine what it means to mother and what it means to be a mother. Through reading a selection of the stories this paper will interrogate possible alternatives to constructions of the 'natural' maternal body and motherhood, suggesting that the Goto's 'monsters' are perhaps only monstrous as a result of scientific discourse which constructs them as such.

Key Words: Hiromi Goto, reproductive technologies, maternal body, scientific discourse, monsters, feminism.

With a variety of reproductive technologies available, who gets to reproduce and when and how becomes, increasingly, a question of access to certain technologies. The quality of the mother's body is important in these technologies because it determines her access to them, whether or not she is apt to reproduce, and as a result certain bodies are deemed more appropriate for pregnancy than others. What this boils down to is not just a reading of the mother's body, but a decision of whether or not her body will be able to give birth to a desirable baby.

Unnatural mothers are those whose bodies are seen as unfit for the task of pregnancy and child rearing, or those who do not adhere to a culturally accepted code of conduct for the pregnant body. These bodies are increasingly subject to scrutiny, testing and monitoring to determine whether they are effectively fulfilling their reproductive role.

These new technologies (ultrasound, artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, to name a few), with their discourse of choice for women - choice about when, how and if to have children - do not open up a variety of reproductive possibilities so much as they alter the way in which reproduction is perceived and the role of the maternal body in it. Arguably, with the advent of technologies that can delay pregnancy, offer pregnancy to under-fertile women, or that can illuminate the womb during gestation serve to shift the relationship of the mother to her foetus, and I will argue that they create a discourse in which the mother is a producer, with the responsibility of delivering a viable product, the offspring. Through a close reading of Hiromi Goto's short story 'Hopeful Monsters' I hope to interrogate how the unnatural mother can serve as a way out of this relationship.

Goto's story interrogates the relationships between mothers and daughters, and the possible variations when one of these two parties slides away from what is considered acceptable or normal. In the title story the protagonist, Hisa, is pregnant and delivers a baby girl who has a tail. While Hisa tries to come to terms with her baby's 'very minor superficial abnormality,'¹ she learns that at birth she too had a tail and that it was removed while her mother was sedated. As Hisa learns first to accept and then to defend her daughter's tail, going so far as to escape with her from the hospital so that her caudal appendage will not be removed, what it means to be a good mother, to protect her child, becomes blurred.

Embedded within the story of unnatural mothers and their offspring are questions about the role of the maternal body in a discourse that increasingly collapses the difference between production and reproduction. As a way into the interrogation of Goto's text this paper seeks to trace how medical intervention into maternity and reproduction creates a discourse of acceptable or natural motherhood by exploring the relationship between women's bodies and the technologies that purport to serve them. As Angela Wall argues, 'nature's control over the body is being eclipsed, as the body is seen less as a natural object and more as a human-technological hybrid, and as popular discourses about new reproductive technologies struggle to describe the ambiguous nature of the female body, the arrival of monsters on the medical horizon seems fitting and timely.'² This human-technology hybrid, I will argue, is one linked to a discourse that converts the reproductive body into a producer of a commodity, responsible for the viability of its product.

Turning then to the monstrous mother and her potentially monstrous offspring, Rosi Braidotti has analysed how, since at least the seventeenth century, the idea that the pregnant woman has 'the capacity to undo the living capital she is carrying in

her womb; the power of her imagination is such that she can actually kill or deform her creation' whether willingly or not.³ The mother's body is so closely linked to the foetus that experiences and impressions suffered during pregnancy are imprinted on the child in utero.

While we might now find laughable the possibility of, as Braidotti recounts, the story of the white princess who, upon giving birth to a black baby, was excused from the charge of adultery by pointing to a large portrait of a Moor which hung above the marital bed, arguing that, '[j]ust looking at the picture of the black man had been enough' to make the child black, the link between the maternal body and the foetal one is still powerful and present.⁴ The idea that the maternal imagination, emotions, and psychological state, not to mention more overt physical behaviours, influence the growth of the foetus and the resultant product has a long history, but the forms it takes have, not surprisingly, shifted. For the monsters interrogated by Braidotti the maternal and the foetal body are inseparable. Since the seventeenth century, the advance of New Reproductive Technologies has altered the relationship between the mother and foetus in ways that separate the two. While the foetal body is physically inside the maternal one, the two are conceptually distanced through the creation of foetal subjecthood. The role of the good mother is to defend this new subject, even if it is at the expense of her own subjectivity.

Lisa Mitchell and Eugenia Georges interrogate this separation through the role of imaging technology and suggest that '[w]omen are constantly monitored during ultrasound not only for foetal anomalies or physical conditions which may complicate labor and delivery but also for their own shortcomings – failure to monitor their bodies and behaviour, failure to be compliant and selfless – in short, for failing to be a 'good mother.'⁵ What constitutes acceptable or desirable behaviours on the part of the mother results in adherence to a list of disciplinary actions, from sources as disparate as the medical community to women's magazines to friends and family? This monitoring leads to both the classification of good and bad mothers, and also links the mother's maternal performance to the quality of her offspring. Good mothers are those who produce good babies. And good babies were once good foetuses.

Using the foetus, as opposed to the infant, as the yardstick by which the mother's performance is measured is a relatively new practise, originating with the capacity to view the foetus inside the womb and results in the imaginary separation of the mother from the foetus. Martha Gimenez argues that new medical practices, and Reproductive Technologies in particular, are 'an example of the capital-intensive approach to medicine [...] which treats medical care as a commodity just like any other.'⁶ The result of this approach to medicine is that the foetus is, in turn, commodified. And so the role of the maternal body is less about reproduction than production and the foetus is less a person in potentia than a being with an assumed subjecthood.

Through the illumination of the womb '[t]he foetus is no longer simply a separate entity, but increasingly, an agent in its own right.'⁷ This agent demands not only specialized care, but through its visualization and interpretation on the screen is scrutinized for whether or not it meets certain standards of quality - standards which it is the mother's job to fulfill. The foetus becomes a being with certain rights, to whose needs and demands the maternal body must be subjugated. The 'common-sense' nature of some of these demands makes them even harder to ignore, whether they be abstaining from drinking alcohol or smoking, to eating properly and getting enough rest.

But what is the correlation between the new reproductive technologies and the separation of the foetus from the mother in the construction of monstrosity? Adele Clarke answers this question by looking at the commodification of reproduction. She argues that 'children themselves are becoming commodities. As people drastically limit their quantities of children, they seek to improve the chances for high quality.'⁸ Here the maternal body can become a receptacle into which it is possible to implant an embryo when and if it appears reasonable to assume that her womb will be a nurturing environment and her body and behaviour adequate and appropriate. To imagine what happens when the productive mother's body is seen as aberrant we need only look at the way in which marginalized pregnant bodies - most specifically the aged body or the differently abled or economically disadvantaged - result in reprobation at the least, and perhaps even sensationalist news stories to see how access to reproductive technologies is dependent upon the correct maternal body. Questions about who has the right to scientifically assisted pregnancies, or even imaging technologies which demonstrate the sex of the foetus, are linked to whether or not the body in question is suitable for reproduction. Those who are not of the 'correct' economic class, or those who are at risk of passing on genetic anomalies, or even aged bodies that do not correspond to the social ideal of motherhood are systematically discouraged from reproducing by scientific means.

Laurie Shrage suggests that the foetus is constructed 'as a prenatal patient deserving societal protection *and* as an object that must meet certain production standards and ideas.'⁹ In this light, the mother becomes both responsible for the protection of the foetus and what it must be protected from. I would argue that the two concerns, protection and production, meld into one and it is her body and her behaviour that which will ensure that the product continues to be both healthy and viable. This idea of the mother-foetus relationship pits the two against each other in a discourse which locks potential mothers into modes of correct behaviour that further scrutinize and discipline them, increasing reliance on scientific methods of pre-natal screening and judgement. However, as the pregnant body is subjected to ever greater scientific intervention and monitoring it becomes necessary to see the foetus and the gestating body as entities not at odds with one another but integrated within one another as this is the a possible way out of the disciplinary bind of

medical/social discourse for maternity which emphasizes the maternal role in production and the foetal role as product.

As a way to envision a maternal body that breaks from the relationship of production-reproduction, I want to turn to Goto's text to see how her 'Hopeful Monsters' offer an alternative. As previously noted, Hisa, the pregnant woman in the story, is shocked to find that she has given birth to a baby with a tail, and even more shocked to find that she herself was born with one. Of particular interest is the way in which the maternal body, Hisa's body, is related to that of her child, being at one and the same time responsible for the monstrous offspring she has produced, and for the conservation of its monstrosity. To negotiate this relationship it is necessary for Hisa and her mother, Junko, to come to terms with their own possibly deviant corporeality.

During Hisa's pregnancy it is her mother who reinforces the importance of the maternal-foetus bond, and the importance of the mother's body for the production of a child that is viable. Junko says '[y]ou must have good thoughts. Bad thoughts will travel down the umbilical tube and affect the baby' possibly causing the 'baby to have psychological problems.'¹⁰ While Hisa corrects her mother, umbilical cord, not tube, she does take her advice into account. She thinks 'good thoughts'¹¹ or tries to, and worries that she is transmitting some sort of trauma to the baby. She tries to eat the right food, get enough exercise, and do what is necessary to ensure that her baby will be healthy. She does not, however, feel that the child she is carrying is her own, or part of her. It is something growing inside of her, for which she is responsible, but it is viewed with detachment.

This relationship changes when the baby is born, for then, '[s]omething maternal crept, bloomed in her heart and spread through her chest. 'I want to see the baby,' she said hoarsely. Proudly.'¹² And yet this pride and 'maternal feeling' shifts yet again when she learns that there is something wrong: 'All that Hisa retained was 'abnormality'. Abnormality tolled in her head like a death knell.'¹³ Despite all her attempts at good thoughts and to do what was best for the baby, she had somehow failed, her daughter is abnormal.

There is a negotiation between what Hisa feels and what she thinks she should feel, wishing that the baby 'was kept in the nursery. They had given her a choice, but she hadn't wanted the nursing staff to think she was cold and heartless, an abnormal woman who didn't want her own baby.'¹⁴ Not surprisingly, Hisa's feelings shift between what she thinks is proper and motherly, and what she really feels toward her baby. Seeing her tail for the first time, she feels only that it is 'wrong, wrong, wrong.'¹⁵ The tail is an embarrassment, the operation to remove it scheduled before she leaves the hospital to ensure that no one will know about it.

The hospital staff and Hisa's husband, and even Hisa herself accept that the only option is to remove the tail, so that the child will be normal and may never know that it was born with a caudal appendage. However, Goto shifts the terms of reproduction, attempting to relocate the child in the mother's body, not separating

the two in a relationship of producer and produced as she begins to think that the monster with a tail is not a production flaw that occurred while the child was in the womb. Hisa begins to question whether what is unnatural is her daughter's tail, or the surgical intervention that removed her own tail. This is validated when Junko apologizes for allowing Hisa's tail to be removed. She says, 'I'm so sorry. I didn't protect you. Please forgive your mama.'¹⁶ What is unnatural is not the birth of the tailed-child but the amputation of a tail. This is further emphasized when Junko comes to tell Hisa about the family's history of tail-ness she is '[a] squat form and hair. Hair standing wild and uncombed like someone from a madhouse! [...] her mother was unrecognisable.'¹⁷ Her mother's appearance, undone, unkempt, frightening, shifts Hisa's feelings of horror from the baby's tail to her mother though eventually she accepts both of them as she begins to wonder '[h]ow many amputated tailless people were out there...?'¹⁸

Goto's text opens up questions about who are the monsters, those with tails or those who would remove the tails. While Hisa admits that '[n]o one could live in this world with a tail! You'd have to join a circus! A freak show!'¹⁹ she nevertheless enlists her mother's help to abandon the hospital, taking her tailed daughter with her. In so doing, the text breaks with the discourse of children as products, opting instead to reinvest the body with its own meaning, one founded in difference. The technologies used to discipline the maternal body, ensuring that the foetus as agent supersedes the mother as subject, are discarded here, and the infant is used not to validate the mother's work through its viability as a commodity, but rather through its capacity to embody otherness.

By suggesting that it is not the mother who delivers difference that is unnatural, but rather the medical (and familial) community that would negate that difference that is aberrant, she undermines the idea that the mother is monstrous. By revindicating her daughter's tail, and lamenting the loss of her own tail, Hisa refuses to recognize herself as a bad mother whose punishment is a less than perfect commodity child. While Reproductive Technologies which seek to determine what is an adequate or acceptable maternal body based on the possibilities it offers for a better quality product bind women within a discourse of good or bad motherhood as measured by their bodily performance of pregnancy, it is possible to imagine other narratives for the maternal body and its offspring.

Notes

¹ H Goto, *Hopeful Monsters*. Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, 2004, p.146.

² A Wall, 'Mothers, Monsters and Family Values: Assisted Reproduction and the Aging Natural Body', *Wild Science: Reading Feminism, Medecine and the Media*, J Marchessault & K Sawchuck (eds), Routledge, London, 2000, p.173.

³ R Braidotti, 'Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Difference', *Feminist Theory and The Body*, J Price & M Shildrick (eds), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999, p. 296.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ L Mitchell & E Georges, 'Cross-Cultural Cyborgs: Greek and Canadian Women's Discourses on Fetal Ultrasound', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Feminists and Fetuses, 1997, p. 381.

⁶ M Gimenez, 'The Mode of Reproduction in Transition: A Marxist-Feminist Analysis of the Effects of Reproductive Technologies', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Special Issue: Marxist Feminist Theory, 1991, p. 335.

⁷ Mitchell & Georges, op. cit., p. 391.

⁸ A Clarke, 'Modernity, Postmodernity & Reproductive Processes ca. 1890-1990, or "Mommy, Where Do Cyborgs Come From Anyway?"', *The Cyborg Handbook*. C Hables-Gray (ed), Routledge, New York, 1995, p. 142.

⁹ L Shrager, 'From Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Barbie: Post-Porn Modernism and Abortion', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2002, p. 71, (my emphasis).

¹⁰ Goto, op. cit., p. 146.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 145.

¹³ Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 150.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 164.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 161.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 161.

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