

Women as Wombs: Reproductive Technologies and the Battle Over Women's Freedom

Janice G. Raymond
North Melbourne: Spinifex, 1994 (first published 1993)

Reviewed by Emily Jeremiah

A passionate yet coolly reasoned polemic, Janice G. Raymond's, *Women as Wombs* offers an array of alarming insights regarding the worldwide implications of new reproductive technologies. Raymond's main charge is that such technologies commodify women, rendering them objects of exchange, mere vessels. Her argument is powerfully and cogently supported by numerous examples of corruption and malpractice on the part of "technological progenitors." It is couched in stringent yet elegant language and it cannot be ignored.

An activist and academic, Raymond is ambivalent towards the academy, which she charges with stuffy elitism, and she proffers here what she terms 'a dose of reality.' Such a claim might appear naive. Indeed, Raymond herself deploys the notion of "discourses" at several points in her book, thereby suggesting a poststructuralist awareness of reality as constructed. Nonetheless, Raymond's insistence on women's lived experience, on their 'dignity' and "integrity," constitutes a refreshing and powerful corrective to certain forms of postmodernism which leave questions of ethics aside. It is this aspect of postmodernism which leads Raymond to reject it out of hand. I would disagree with her here. For feminist postmodernism has, in recent years, sought to develop an ethics of "mutual responsibility and care" (Shildrick, 1997: 122), which would be fluid and alive to specific contexts.

Raymond herself is a practitioner of such a postmodernist ethics (although she would balk at the thought). Postmodernist accounts of maternity view it as contingent, constructed, and relational, as does Raymond, whose treatment of reproduction is highly nuanced. One of the many strengths of Raymond's account is its global perspective; this is a metanarrative, but it is one intensely aware of cultural and national differences. Raymond thus shares with postmodernist feminism a concern to challenge and develop white, middle-class, feminist thinking of earlier years. Her preoccupation with issues of race and class underpins and strengthens this challenge. Raymond also stresses that mothering is a relational process; the postmodernist decentering of the subject which she criticizes has, in fact, offered fuel to this notion, and can, I believe, be drawn upon fruitfully rather than merely jettisoned. But while Raymond is a little unfair in her critique of postmodernist feminism, her call for women to act together is both urgent and compelling. It highlights usefully aspects of postmodernism which are problematic for humanist feminism; in particular, it

forces us to consider the notion of a feminist community as vital. Raymond thus both contributes to and challenges postmodernist thinking.

She offers numerous other insights. Raymond's view of the body as something one *is* rather than something one *owns*, is illuminating. It constitutes a powerful tool in the author's critique of liberalism with its ideals of (masculine) autonomy and agency, and it posits the embodied subject as a reality which is not to be ignored. Raymond is also excellent on the issue of choice, pointing out that decisions are made in specific contexts, and informed by innumerable factors; where reproductive liberals extol choice as the ultimate value, they are being glib and simplistic. In addition, Raymond delicately steers a course between presenting women as victims of an oppressive institution, and highlighting their agency. She is above all concerned with power, criticizing the ineffectual discourse of "women's rights" as inadequate. Raymond always is keenly aware of the complexity of context, identifying and untangling the mesh of factors involved in the issue of reproduction. She uncovers the links between sexuality and reproduction, between the status of women and that of children, and between the ideologies of maternity and femininity. *Women as Wombs* is thus searching, complex, and important.

Reference

Shildrick, Margrit. 1997. *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics*. London and New York: Routledge.