

The Only Ones by Carola Dibbell

written by Alex Lee | June 25, 2015



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Great stories arise out of the virtual mass of incoherency, some tendency or some motion makes the cut. That cut allows for the first segregation of difference to arise so that we now have an imbalance that needs to be addressed, one that is hopefully compelling, entertaining and thought provoking.

Given as in three stages, *The Only Ones*, Dibbell sets her work in a dystopian world where human biology is failing. In the nest of disease (with possible vaccination issues) and other over-polluted domains of human agency, Dibbell draws parallels between our ruined cities, our diseased and polluted environments and our infertility. People suddenly cannot have children. Out of this panic, arises a subject – the medical subject. At first, nameless, young and only interested in earning money as a test subject for multiple screens of disease vaccinations and new medicines, our protagonist, Inez Fardo, comes to find her way out of the realm of paid test subjects to strike out on her own. This medical subject follows the rubric of that endorsed by what disciples of Foucault and Deleuze might call “the society of control”. Such a society is modernism incarnate: the massive mechanization of human material, formed and molded. Studied and controlled. This was the way humanity fought back against diseases and viruses, epidemics that could wipe out humankind. Through sheer circumstance, however, the medical subject, in her search for more lucrative funds finds herself in a highly illegal place where a rogue scientist is willing to create new children for rich parents. Human cloning. The risk, is that it’s highly illegal. The benefit of cloning Inez Fardo: She’s a Sylvian Hardy, one who can survive the toughest of diseases.

At first thought, through the cold filter of being paid for genes, our subject is saddled with an unwanted clone that she takes to raise as her own daughter. Confused, afraid (as it is deathly illegal) and running afoul in computer systems that can’t tell the difference between her DNA and her child’s, the second part of Dibbell’s story begins. This time, it’s not about cloning but about parenting.

This time subjectivity isn’t medical, but rather, parental, giving rise to the second stage of subjectivity in the book. Here Inez attempts to find the right educational opportunities for her daughter despite not having opportunities herself. Given that children are rare, and people’s genes are peppered with impurities and anomalous conditions, we lose one normal to gain another: special is the new normal. And Inez’s daughter Ani is special. And,

like all children, Ani is both similar to and different from her mom.

In the wake of all the disease and degradation, the will to go on is deferred in the form of a parent's (mother's) will to provide. Refuge of this existential crisis, as to why one is alive, when so many others die, a variety of alternative subjectivities also run through the book, parallel to Inez's. The big one is the Fundies (fundamentalists) who uphold Authority by

burn[ing] down everything they think is not God's Will. A lot of times, what they mean is how you were born, or your kid was born. They was very big on being born the regular way. Well, what those vigilantes got a problem with, Ani is it for sure. Not that they could just tell by looking. And by the way, these nuts don't seem so regular herself.

Similar to Judith Butler's concept of performativity, Dibbell introduces a new form of non-sexual subjectivity, that of a singularity. Here subjectivity is predicated on the repetition of parenting. Completely from Inez's point of view, we only get a scattered view of dual fear, one that her child will be deprived of a livelihood, and the other that somehow the authorities will find out what's going on and shut them down. These two fears contextualize one another, giving way to a new subjectivity: motherhood. As we've witnessed through the recent vaccination debates, the limits of medical agency and parenthood compete for the same space. It's no mistake that this same space constitutes the area of greatest struggle for Inez. Like her child later on also, cloning herself, Inez forgoes being a medical subject that is singularly interested in her own ability to earn a living to become a mother-subject who is singularly interested in her ability to raise her child properly.

This tendency eventually takes precedence, as the majority of the book is about this struggle, as Inez eventually transcends the illegality of human cloning as she realizes the fullness of subjectivity extends beyond one's DNA. Dibbell writes:

Sometimes I thought the whole clone panic was made up. Like, this is going to get people's minds off everyone being dead. Like, come on, even with everyone dead, no infrastructure, no kids, even no Ethics, at least in New York, we still have too much ethics to commit crimes against nature like nuclear Transfer.

In this way, the law of the Other, as the society that still wants to control, is twisted in on itself as Inez slowly becomes successful in raising her child despite the poverty of being on the under steps of the government. What is the fear of cloning? It appears that the government's use of DNA imprinting is the only form of control they have over tracking people. If Inez is successful, why shouldn't cloning be legal?

Like the queering of sexuality as a form of establishing subjective agency beyond heteronormativity, Dibbell's parent subjectivity is also a reverse of the Oedipal complex as a subjectivity generator. Only here, the castration isn't the desires of the child being frustrated. Castration comes in the form of the desires of the parent forestalled by the child. Only when Ani breaks

free of Inez does Inez come, like workers realizing class consciousness, to become universalized as a solid political awareness of herself as agent, as an invested permanent identity.

With this, Inez comes to realize that her genetic material is not only cloneable, a feat in itself, but she is also a Sylvian Hardy. She is made of the stuff that will let humans survive the cocktail of diseases that have decimated humanity. She has given her daughter the key to the future. This is parallel to any parent's fear and worry about the nature of their child. As we increase medical knowledge, we become more aware of the special contingencies of each child. Did it work? Will it work? It's a parent's wish for their child to be super-normal. So only when her daughter successfully clones, marking a new normalcy, does Inez breathe a sigh and understand that it did work. It will work. It does work.

This brings us to the third phase of subjectivity, that of a kind of universality, as Inez reaches into the net to look for others like her, like Ani, to collect identity through their repetition. Although this reaches towards the end of the book, we witness the normalization of language as Inez comes to understand herself, as those like her, as a viable normality rather than as a blemish on God and Authority. While I had thought that the book's shifting language, from clipped abbreviations ripe with metaphor, synecdoche and ill-matching tense fragments to fuller sentences with less jarring grammar was an odd choice of Dibbell's, we can see that the calming of language mirrors Inez's development as an expression of complete regularity with herself. She doesn't see the world as clipped and partial because she doesn't understand herself as being clipped and partial anymore.

In a strange way, Dibbell manages to extend normalcy as a performativity of reproduction, which is why Inez comes to learn how to collect and transfer nuclei for her own eggs for further clones of herself like how she learned to hack the government computers' "pure code". That which can extend itself indefinitely is that which is here to stay, forming a new baseline. As queer theory points out, a stable cultural basis may be needed, but it is our self-deployment with regards to that basis that we formulate our own subjectivity. So likewise, do parenting and other bases require a standard of normalcy to organize social standards around, even if that normalcy is the paradoxical "every child is special.". Perhaps the lesson Dibbell imparts to us is simply that, if you can make it work, then go for it. Who knows? There may be others like you out there, somewhere, and so you are no longer the only one.