

MOTHERSTRUCK! THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE

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Despite having oscillated from “radical feminist” to “moderate feminist” to “better-informed radical feminist,” I’ve always been ambivalent about a popular feminist topic: abortion. “Xingjian,” you might say, “you intern at Planned Parenthood. What could you possibly be ambivalent about?” The answer lies in my annoyance with the rhetoric that equates a pro-choice stance exclusively with abortion access. Abortion access is important. Nevertheless, in the fight for reproductive freedom, it’s easy to overlook that the decision to *have* a child can be just as controversial and stigmatized as the decision to abort a fetus. Furthermore, the social acceptance of this decision is inextricably linked to a woman’s race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and many more factors. To put it bluntly, for women without a white picket fence, a stable white-collar job (or a white-collar breadwinner), and a wholesome, heterosexual marriage, having a kid can be a much frowned-upon decision.

Staceyann Chin, a single Jamaican lesbian poet living in a not-yet-gentrified part of Brooklyn, chronicles this decision in *MotherStruck!*, her one-woman show. The show, which was directed by Cynthia Nixon, ran from December 2015 to January 2016 at the Lynn Redgrave Theater—only a few steps away from the Manhattan clinic of Planned Parenthood. When I heard Chin was doing a one-woman show, I was beyond excited. Chin is an incredible writer and a renowned activist. Her slam poem, “All Oppression is Connected,” is one of the most powerful manifestos for intersectionality that I have ever experienced. Her memoir of her childhood, *The Other Side of Paradise*, is alternately hilarious, sad, and hopeful. *MotherStruck!* is closer to a memoir than a manifesto, but Chin’s struggles in conceiving and parenting a child still prompt a political question: In our society, who gets to have kids?

When Chin first plans to have a child, she’s married. Her husband, Peter, is also gay, so their nuclear family is a bit unorthodox. Regardless, they are prepared for parenthood. However, before they can make that happen, a not-yet 30-year-old Peter passes away. In her grief, Chin hatches a new plan. She decides that she will meet the love of her life, and afterwards:

We will spend 2.25 years reveling in the magic of our romance. Then, over careful, respectful, non-hostile negotiations and even more careful planning, we’d select the perfect sperm donor, who would have to, of course, be the exact combination of both our ethnicities, to assist in conceiving the radical feminist ninja messiah we intend to release upon the Patriarchy. (Chin)

At this point, it is hard to not admire Chin for her hilariously meticulous fantasy. Unfortunately, her plan doesn't quite pan out, and after a series of breakups, Chin resolves to raise a radical feminist ninja messiah on her own. Despite a uterine tumor, flakey sperm donors, and a failed at-home artificial insemination attempt, she finally gives birth to a child, Zuri, at the end of Act I.

Act II focuses on the difficulties of single motherhood. Chin is a successful poet and author: she has published a well-received memoir, performs regularly, and tours internationally. Nevertheless, she is financially unstable. Soon after giving birth, she goes on tour with her suitcase in one hand and her daughter in the other in order to pay her bills. She goes home to Jamaica, finds her mother in Berlin, and is tempted by a friend to move to Fort Lauderdale. While Act I is an exploration of how to get pregnant, Act II hints at a more uncomfortable question that Suzanna Bowling articulates in a short review for the *Times Square Chronicles*: “Who is paying for that child you so desperately wanted?”

This question is a common one, and conservatives and liberals alike level it at single mothers. Dr. David Green, who directs the conservative think tank Civitas in the United Kingdom, callously asserts: “If you haven't got the money, you shouldn't have children” (Martin). In 2015, traditionally centrist publications like “the *New York Times*, *Slate*, and the *American Journal of Public Health* . . . published articles recommending increased use of provider-controlled long-acting contraceptives among low-income populations in order to reduce poverty, high school drop-out rates, and Medicaid costs” (Roberts 80). Reproductive choices of poor people are scrutinized, because the common answer to resolve poverty is for them to stop reproducing.

Conservative and liberal rhetorics converge into one theme: responsibility. The underlying assumption is that childrearing is a private choice that needs to be made within a societal context. The responsibility falls on potential parents—specifically, women—to evaluate whether they should have children. Rickie Solinger, a historian and curator, explains that there are various social factors that determine whether a woman's reproductive choices are legitimate (3). Often, these choices are considered to be more morally justifiable if a woman is married, white, financially stable, and able-bodied. Chin's decision is ambiguous: even though she read many prenatal books and paid handsomely for the technology to impregnate herself, she is single and does not have a stable income. Is Chin's decision moral?

Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, explains that there are five primary spheres of our moral sense: harm, justice, community, purity, and authority (36). Each society ranks the five spheres differently, and they sometimes clash with one another. In the West, Pinker argues, harm and justice are held to be paramount (52). From this model, it is not difficult to see why the choice for a woman like Chin to have a child can be seen as immoral. It would be harmful to the child if she were to be brought up in an environment that does not meet her needs. If society takes the responsibility to pay for the child to avoid the previous scenario, it's unjust,

because other people become responsible for a decision that they did not make. Both these arguments are contingent on taking an individualistic perspective of society, but we would be mistaken to believe it is the only way to see the world. What happens if we also value the moral sphere of “community?” Generally, people who care about community “value loyalty to a group, sharing and solidarity among its members and conformity to its norms” (Pinker 36). If we look at child rearing from a community-centered perspective, we see that the rhetoric of individual choice ignores a glaring question: Have we designed our communities to empower families and raise healthy children? More importantly, should we?

Members of the reproductive justice movement would unhesitatingly answer “yes” to the second question, and “no” to the first. The term “reproductive justice” was coined in 1994 and was popularized by the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective in 2003. At its core, the reproductive justice framework is community-centered. This is reflected in SisterSong’s mission statement: “Doing Collectively What We Cannot Do Individually” (“SisterSong”). According to the Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, one of the organizations that founded SisterSong, reproductive justice is:

[T]he complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, economic, and social well-being of women and girls, and will be achieved *when women and girls have the economic, social and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, sexuality and reproduction for ourselves, our families and our communities in all areas of our lives.* (ACRJ 1)

ACRJ makes the distinction between reproductive health, reproductive rights, and reproductive justice. Reproductive health is a service delivery-based framework with the underlying assumption that issues are rooted in a lack of services. Advocates of reproductive rights, on the other hand, believe that the lack of individual rights and access are the root of the problem. Reproductive justice is an intersectional model. In practice, that model means explicitly tackling issues of poverty, racism, and other factors that contribute to reproductive oppression (ACRJ 1). Kimala Price, an associate professor of women and gender studies at the University of San Diego, explains that reproductive justice can encompass and expand upon the first two frameworks: it “supports keeping abortion legal and advocates for women’s right not to have children, but also for women’s right to *have* children and to *parent* the children that they have” (56). It is unsurprising that this framework, focusing so much on the importance of solidarity and community, is unpopular in a nation that romanticizes pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. Protecting women’s right to have children and to parent involves the creation of a supportive infrastructure.

Rhonda Copelon, a human rights lawyer, states that the lack of community sentiment stems from the assumption that “the personal is separate from the political, and that the larger social structure has no impact on private, individual choice” (33).

This is simply untrue. Women face a host of societal pressures when it comes to their reproductive choices, and these pressures vary. For instance, Loretta J. Ross, one of the founding organizers of SisterSong, points out that white women are encouraged to reproduce and that their oppression has been rooted in social barriers that prevent them from accessing contraceptives and abortion. Women of color, on the other hand, have been discouraged from having children. They have been targets of sterilization, welfare family caps, and forced contraception (3). Therefore, proponents for access to abortion and contraception indirectly engage in a narrative that further marginalizes women of color. A choice cannot be considered a choice when there are elements of coercion; a reproductive justice framework recognizes and examines these elements.

Recognizing and examining these elements is what *MotherStruck!* does so well. While Chin does not explicitly focus on her multifaceted identity, her show demonstrates that her family background, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation are inextricable from her journey of motherhood. Chin was abandoned by her father at birth and seldom saw her mother. Her frame of reference to motherhood is already unusual and distant, and she has to find guidance elsewhere. She's a lesbian and a survivor of corrective rape, and understandably does not want to conceive via heterosexual sex. Therefore, her impregnation options are limited to a syringe and a soy sauce dish or a trip to a clinic. If she had not been a successful poet, her journey in search of a child may have very well ended after the first couple of failed attempts. After the birth of her child, Chin discovers how hard it is to be a single working mother. She tells us about the people who have helped her along the way: her friends; a police officer who gives her a ride home; Peter's little brother, who ends up being her sperm donor. Even if Chin did not intend to juxtapose her supportive community against the absence of state-funded, family-planning infrastructure, her story shows us that in a society where having a child is subject to so much scrutiny, solidarity and friendship can support a family. In this sense, *MotherStruck!* is a heartwarming story about the power of a connected community in the face of an individualistic society.

MotherStruck! is an effective addition to the reproductive justice movement because it harnesses the art of storytelling. When it is employed as a form of activism, the goals of storytelling are to “enhance representation, educate, strengthen communal bonds, and mediate between policymakers and constituents” (Lenart-Cheng and Walker 152). Stories can achieve these goals because they humanize. Many people have been reduced to stereotypes and statistics, but when we are invited into their worlds and listen to their narratives, we come to sympathize with their emotions, rationalizations, and decisions. Ultimately, we identify with them and become willing to extend solidarity. This is of utmost importance in reproductive justice because the public strips poor, non-white women of their humanity. Franklin Gilliam, a former professor of political science and public policy at University of California, Los Angeles, conducted an experimental study about perceptions of the “welfare queen” through which he discovered that people immediately recognize the “welfare queen” as a black

woman with children (49-50). Furthermore, after people see a black “welfare queen,” they become more opposed to public spending (Gilliam 52). Black women’s reproductive choices and poverty have converged into a derogatory caricature, and people make political decisions contingent upon this stereotype. In light of this dehumanization of black women, *MotherStruck!* becomes an even more important play. A black woman affirming her right to have a child is nothing short of an act of resistance.

Chin successfully pulls at our heartstrings in her one-woman show, which is no easy task. It’s already hard for a single person to command attention for two hours, and the difficulty is compounded by a lack of suspense: She regularly features Zuri on her Facebook page, so many members of the audience, including me, already know that Chin has a child. Still, I found myself enraptured. Chin is forceful and explosive and communicates nuance via her intense eyes and vivacious facial expressions. She frequently contorts her body, subdues her voice and even darts into the audience. Her dynamic presence is more than enough for the tiny stage.

Interestingly, many critics failed to pick up on the underlying reproductive justice themes in Chin’s work. Charles Isherwood wrote a glowing review of *MotherStruck!* in the *New York Times* that focuses on her charisma, powerful delivery, and hilarious storytelling. He remarks that it’s great that she got the child she has always wanted, despite the odds. To him, *MotherStruck!* is a story about overcoming individual obstacles and reaching personal fulfillment through hard work, luck, and interpersonal support. Isherwood does not engage with the potentially controversial topic of having the “right” to bear children. Similarly, David Spencer, writing for *The Village Voice*, praises her for her dynamic and cathartic monologue, yet also shies away from the controversy. This is probably because she does not pose the difficult reproductive justice questions explicitly: Do women have the right to have and raise children? If so, how do we protect that right?

Admittedly, I had expected Chin to bluntly criticize a society that makes it so difficult to have kids. After all, she is known for blending political commentary into her art. However, in *MotherStruck!*, she does not blame anyone for structuring a world where raising a child is an individual effort. Even though Chin doesn’t think her decision to be a mother is irresponsible, she does emphasize—through a series of anecdotes—that she is dedicated and hardworking. She goes to lengths to demonstrate that she has “earned” her right to motherhood, despite her financial instability, because she does everything she can for her child. Does her focus on individual effort somehow undermine the message that women should be supported in childrearing? Perhaps. When we look at her work through a reproductive justice lens, we can see that she had to depict herself as hardworking in order for the audience to sympathize with her. In a society already so hostile towards “freeloaders” and “welfare queens,” the outspoken, immigrant, and black Staceyann Chin cannot outright assert that she is entitled to have children without coming under a barrage of attacks from critics.

Therefore, as viewers we must go the extra step and draw the connection to reproductive justice after she has laid the groundwork for the conversation.

Even though the theatre critics seemed oblivious to Chin's cues, reproductive freedom advocates were quick to recognize the underlying message. Alexander Sanger, the chair of the International Planned Parenthood Council, penned a short opinion piece in the *Huffington Post* after watching the show. He said that her story reminded him that the decision to become pregnant is as important as the one to terminate a pregnancy, and both decisions need to be supported. Planned Parenthood of New York City's Activist Council also hosted a panel discussion after a performance. The reception of *MotherStruck!* by reproductive health advocates is encouraging. It's a sign that the unique reproductive obstacles faced by women of color are being heard.

The morality of Staceyann Chin's choice, when viewed through the lens of "harm" and "fairness," can seem dubious. However, through adopting the value of "community," the question shifts from whether it is moral for a woman to have a child in a financially unstable situation to whether it is moral for members of a society not to create infrastructure that facilitates family planning. Reproductive justice is about making the meaningful decision to become a parent, without coercive forces that masquerade as individual choice. Chin hints at an idea that discomfits progressives and conservatives alike: Women have the right to have children, even when they are not completely financially and romantically stable. This claim seems outlandish to many. However, when we apply the lens of reproductive justice, it's clear that it's the system—not the women—that needs to be fixed.

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