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# 'You Never Thought about Me, Did You?' Cloning and the Right to Reproductive Choice in Eva Hoffman's *The Secret* (2001)

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**Abstract:** This article will critically appraise the extent to which new developments in the fields of reproductive technology are shown to impact female bodily autonomy and reproductive choice in Eva Hoffman's novel *The Secret*. *The Secret* pushes its readers towards the more pressing and urgent questions arising from ongoing developments within the field of NRT and human cloning in a neoliberal climate. The novel cautions that, ultimately, the individual right to reproductive choice is never completely free; an awareness of external influences and a consideration of possible repercussions is integral to responsible decision-making in the context of NRT and cloning. However, the novel moves towards a possible reconceptualization of NRTs as part of the evolutionary progress of humankind. In returning to the body and biopolitical figurations, this article sees the novel's protagonist, Iris, and her emergent cyborg identity as a manifestation of Haraway's monstrous cyborg replete with possibility.

**Keywords:** cloning; cyborg; Haraway; biopolitics; science fiction; speculative fiction; reproductive technology; NRT; feminism; contemporary feminism; choice feminism; women's writing



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Proffering freedom from biological constraints, reproductive technologies have the capacity to provide bodily autonomy for women—yet, typically, it is the female body that bears the consequences of these new technological developments due to its capacity to bear and birth children. It is perhaps for this reason that the subject of biological reproduction remains at the heart of contentions brought about at the intersection of feminism and technology (Vint 2022, p. 9). Additionally, as we live in an epoch where the speculative and the material are inseparable (Vint 2021, p. 4), the female body becomes a fundamental site for the manifestation of issues surrounding reproductive choice and the implications of these choices upon the future for women. Through its portrayals of futuristic scenarios based on current feminist concerns, speculative fiction holds the possibility of exploring representations of female reproduction in new and innovative ways, creatively assessing and reconfiguring contemporary feminist ideologies surrounding maternity, reproduction and choice. This article will critically appraise the extent to which developments in the field of new reproductive technologies (NRTs) are shown to impact female bodily autonomy and reproductive choice in Eva Hoffman's novel *The Secret* (Hoffman 2001). The novel shifts the consequences of NRT away from the mother's body and onto the body of the child through its exploitation of the trope of the clone, which complicates the neoliberal concept of a free, unhindered choice by demonstrating that one woman's reproductive choice may come at the expense of another woman's bodily autonomy. However, rather than merely providing a dystopian warning, the novel moves towards a reconceptualization of NRTs as part of the evolutionary progress of humankind.

Although an increasing sense of urgency over the influence of new technologies upon humanity has developed in recent years (Vint 2022, p. 3), mirroring the accelerated rate of scientific progress in the twenty-first century, engagement with the issues surrounding NRTs is nothing new when it comes to the treatment of reproduction within contemporary

women's speculative fiction. Indeed, an interest in motherhood and reproduction can be traced back as early as the 1930s, with a vast body of work emerging from the 1970s feminist science fiction movement that has concentrated on exploring the potential and the impact of reproductive technologies (Merrick 2009, p. 235). Some of these now-canonical texts and authors include Pamela Sargent's *Cloned Lives* (Sargent 1978), *The Female Man* (Russ 1985) by Joanna Russ, *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Gilman 1986), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (Piercy 1987) and Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (Butler 1987). The popularity of parthenogenesis and cloning as alternative models of reproduction is a common theme within many of these texts (Roy 2008, p. 236), serving as tropes to illustrate both the oppression and liberation of women's bodies through reimagining their reproductive capacity and exhibiting clear parallels with a particular mode of second-wave feminism that advocated the achievement of bodily autonomy through reproductive control (as advocated by Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (Firestone [1970] 2015)<sup>1</sup>, for example). However, what is new or different in twenty-first century manifestations of speculative fiction written by women is a more obvious focus on individual choice, which mirrors the increasing emphasis on choice feminism that shapes much contemporary feminist politics within the neoliberal climate of the twenty-first century (Budgeon 2015, p. 3). Published in 2001, *The Secret* reflects some of the anxieties surrounding NRT at the turn of the twenty-first century; however, it continues to speak to current feminist concerns through its speculative engagement with the problematics of choice within the context of human cloning.

Michelle M. Lazar utilises 'choice feminism' to refer to a shift from an emphasis on the social and political to the personal decision-making of women, facilitated through the permeation of the language of choice (Lazar 2011, p. 43). On the one hand, individualised choice feminism has the potential to act as a liberating and inclusive advancement, particularly as a means for women to gain control over their maternal bodies; for instance, choice rhetoric has formed the basis of feminist movements seeking to establish bodily autonomy and the right to abortion.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, when left unquestioned, the inward-looking nature of choice feminism breeds a dangerous level of ignorance of the influence that external factors—local, national, and global—have upon the individual. Shelley Budgeon argues that choice feminism reinforces a 'regressive form of 'neoliberal feminism'' (Budgeon 2015, p. 3), where neoliberal feminism and choice feminism become interchangeable as they both fail to acknowledge, and therefore to question or challenge, the constructs of the existing social order. Budgeon claims that choice is socially conditioned (Budgeon 2015, p. 8), affirming the dilemma that not every choice is an informed one and some women can end up unwittingly colluding with existing constructs of power and constraint. A failure to critically engage with the personal means that not every choice is accountable, and so some women consequently display behaviours that fall outside the remit of a socially responsible feminism. Lola Olufemi's *Feminism, Interrupted* (Olufemi 2020) positions choice feminism within a neoliberal model of feminism, highlighting the dangers of a system that 'fetishises personal choice' (Olufemi 2020, p. 61); placing the individual and their personal choices as the locus of feminist politics prioritises the self at the expense of others (Olufemi 2020, pp. 3–4). An uncritical approach to the nature of choice means that 'choice' becomes synonymous with 'freedom'; choice feminism consequently designates freedom as an automatically given right, when for many women, this is not the case. Olufemi argues that one of feminism's core principles is indeed freedom, but this is 'freedom to, not just freedom from' (Olufemi 2020, p. 9). Therefore, a critical approach to choice through the interrogation of why different choices are available to different women and why different women make different choices is necessary for ensuring a 'freedom to'—for all.

*The Secret* (Hoffman 2001) is a continuation of the aforementioned genealogy of feminist science fiction that exploits the popular trope of cloning. The novel tells the story of Iris, an only child who is raised in near-isolation by her controlling and autocratic mother Elizabeth. The narrative charts Iris's coming of age as she begins to question the peculiar circumstances of her upbringing and why it is that she and her mother have no discernible

relationships with close friends or family. The reason for this is gradually unearthed as the mysterious story of her conception is revealed; the 'secret' is that Iris is Elizabeth's clone. This disturbing revelation throws the relationship between Iris and her mother into turmoil, and Iris embarks on her own journey of selfhood to discover what it means to be human. She learns that she is only capable of achieving a truly autonomous and individual identity through the severance of all ties with her mother. The consequences of the reproductive choice made by Iris's mother, Elizabeth, are central to *The Secret's* narrative and its consideration of the controversies surrounding the issue of cloning as a viable method of human reproduction. However, rather than the liberating potential of NRTs that is typical of many of the aforementioned examples of second-wave feminist speculative fiction, there is evidence of a certain discomfort that is more characteristic of current feminist attitudes towards artificial reproduction (Roy 2008, p. 227). Deboleena Roy highlights this discomfort experienced by many feminists in posing the question, 'Should Feminists Clone?' (Roy 2008), but also advises that exploring the practice of cloning may lead to new feminist politics through a return to the body and biology: (re)configuring new perspectives from within the natural sciences can create new feminist practices (Roy 2008, pp. 227–28). In light of Roy's proposition, this article will demonstrate how *The Secret* contributes towards a feminist reflection upon the nature of the choices that are available and who they are available to, leading to the importance of accountability for the wider repercussions of individual choice. Additionally, as noted by Sherryl Vint, the importance of Haraway's figure of the cyborg<sup>3</sup> in framing the issues surrounding science, technology and women's lives remains (Vint 2022, p. 2): through returning to the body and biopolitics, this article sees the novel's protagonist, Iris, and her emergent cyborg identity as a manifestation of Haraway's monstrous cyborg replete with possibility.

Within the near-future setting of the novel, readily available access to NRTs has led to traditional familial units becoming a thing of the past; married heterosexual couples and children with a 'real daddy' are a rarity, 'left over from the late twentieth century' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 64). However, the novel's near-future is one of transition, where the very recent introduction of human cloning is still considered a deviant practice (Stuart 2008, pp. 50–51). Therefore, there is a portrayal of an obvious societal bias towards heteronormative family structures. The decline in heteronormative parenting has proved of sufficient concern to warrant the introduction of a new Congress bill providing tax incentives for couples who stay together for more than three years, designed to 'encourage family life and natural reproduction' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 2909).<sup>4</sup> This incentivization of a particular reproductive pathway exemplifies a prevalent cultural assumption, as outlined by Victoria Davion, whereby heterosexual modes of reproduction are regarded as natural and morally good (Davion 2006, p. 60). According to this logic, cloning is unnatural and immoral, a logic that Davion problematises as essentially homophobic in that it disallows people from the gay and lesbian community the opportunity to independently create their own biological offspring (Davion 2006, p. 66). Davion discusses the idealistic, and subversive, potential of cloning, as it allows for reproductive freedom and increased opportunities (Davion 2006, p. 70). In this respect, within the novel, the technological advancements that have led to the legalisation of human cloning mean that Elizabeth is able to satisfy her maternal desire through a totally independent route into motherhood that is free from the imposed pressures of heterosexual coupling and biological time constraints, waiting until her forties 'because she wanted some unencumbered adulthood' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 61). However, as noted by Olufemi, 'legality does not equal access' (Olufemi 2020, p. 47); the truly subversive potential of cloning is not realised, as the novel implies that the introduction of cloning would attract women of a particular demographic, like Iris's mother Elizabeth. This raises the question of the equality of access to reproductive choice and to whom cloning would be a readily available option.

Clare Hanson argues that, through the character of Elizabeth, the novel links cloning to both female agency and privilege, underlining that 'biology is never prior to culture but is produced and mediated by specific social conditions' (Hanson 2020, p. 126). The

political constructs of reproduction are further held by Vint to be 'marked by differences of ethnicity and class' (Vint 2022, p. 3). Arguably, Elizabeth's decision to use cloning as a means of reproduction is conditioned by her position as an affluent white woman who has had it all: 'College, success, boyfriends, working on the cutting edge of the global economy' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 61). A Princeton graduate who spent ten years working as an investment consultant and having broken through the glass ceiling (Hoffman 2001, loc. 36), Elizabeth's significant financial freedom means that 'she could afford almost anything she wanted' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 218). Therefore, cloning is a reproductive choice that is available to Elizabeth because of her extremely privileged lifestyle. Iris, one of the first successful results of human cloning, notices that the majority of clones are like her, mostly women and mostly around the same age; 'the reasons were so obvious that they made me shudder' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 2846). Davion raises the important question of who would be likely to benefit from the introduction of cloning by positing that the future users of cloning would be similar to the current users of new reproductive technology (NRT), which are comprised almost entirely of white people (Davion 2006, p. 72). With demonstrable links between race and class and the ability to access NRTs, Davion predicts that 'we can expect cloning to serve privileged, mostly white elites' (Davion 2006, p. 73). Laura Briggs also notes concerns that a dependency on a high financial status in order to access reproductive healthcare may accentuate further inequalities (Briggs 2010, p. 362), whilst Dorothy Roberts warns of the potential for reproductive technologies to reinforce a 'reproductive caste system' that privileges wealthy white women (Roberts 2009, p. 784). The novel gestures towards this fact through emphasising Elizabeth's advantaged position, which is referred to several times by Iris as she observes the way in which her mother has developed an increasing sense of entitlement: 'my mother wasn't someone who was easily prevented from getting what she wanted. . . She thought the world belonged to her and that she could only improve it. She had the right ideas, the right values and the right strategies. It followed that she should have what she wanted' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 36): 'As always, she got what she wanted' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 61). Elizabeth's ease of access to NRTs through her privileged position exemplifies Vint's concerns over biotechnologies within a liberal humanist context that upholds class and racial inequalities (Vint 2021, p. 89). Additionally, Elizabeth's right to choice is shown to be at the complete disregard of others, demonstrating one of the dangers of individualistic choice feminism, as posited by Greta Gaard: 'the rhetoric of choice excludes a multitude of women in order to focus on elite women for whom choice is possible. . . by focusing on the individual woman, the rhetoric of choice excludes consideration of the context of social, economic and environmental conditions that influence and limit women's choice for both contraception and fertility' (Gaard 2010, p. 113). As the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that Elizabeth's right to reproductive choice is namely at the expense of her daughter (sister, twin), Iris.

Hoffman's selection of narrative perspective is key to her exploration of the nature of such a choice: *The Secret's* narrative perspective is that of Iris, so the implications of the choices surrounding reproductive technologies are explored through the physical embodiment of the consequence of such choices. Therefore, examining this issue through the subjective lens of the child illuminates the need to consider reproductive freedom and one's individual right to choice alongside the impact that those choices will have upon others. Additionally, the reader is also encouraged to see Elizabeth's choice as impelled by unconscious narcissistic desires through its abundant references to psychoanalytic theory. Parts of the story are told retrospectively through Iris's regular counselling sessions, where references to Freud, the Id and Oedipal rivalry abound during the interjections of her Adviser, who positions Iris within 'a pathological version of the mother-daughter bond' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 521). The trope of the clone points to a narcissism that may drive reproductive decisions in the context of assisted reproductive technology, which is compounded through allusions to Elizabeth's conceited egotism. Such a characterisation of Elizabeth may be extended and considered a typical trait of the type of woman who would choose to have herself cloned (Stuart 2008, p. 44). The idea that narcissism was a driving

factor in Elizabeth's choice is indicated by Iris, who notes Elizabeth's desire for a replication of herself as well as the conception of a new life: 'I peered into her and was sucked into her eyes, and saw something from within them, saw her desire for my birth, for another her/me. . .' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 914). In interviews, Hoffman has spoken of how the lack of a biological father and the deliberate, manufactured nature of cloning means that 'it really is like coming out of Athena's head or being an echo' (Webster 2003, p. 765), a concept that is reinforced through the novel's repeated references to mirroring. Through the clone of Iris, Elizabeth's status shifts, and she becomes 'the source of all significance. . . no longer just herself, but a model, a prototype whose meaning was assured by its re-embodiment'; however, this endorsement of Elizabeth's own identity subsequently reduces Iris to a mere 'reflection' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 485). The reductive effects upon Iris's subjectivity are made all the more apparent through these references to mirroring, reinforcing the notion of merely reflecting an identity as opposed to projecting one: 'an enlarging looking-glass, into which I entered through her eyes and in which I dissolved, becoming indistinguishable from her, becoming her. . . as if I were the mirror that could tell her things' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 87). The gradual superseding of Iris by her mother draws attention to the fact that the product of Elizabeth's reproductive actions, the clone/child, is overlooked in favour of the original/mother's right to individual choice. Elizabeth's newfound motherhood gradually takes on a form of maternal oppression over her daughter, and Iris's status as an autonomous individual subject thus becomes open for interrogation throughout the novel.

From the moment she discovers that she is a clone, Iris embodies a literal manifestation of the issues surrounding selfhood and autonomy as she is unable to distinguish between 'She/me' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 1893) and maintain her own identity as independent from that of her mother. Arguably, these issues stem from the failure of language to adequately account for the complexity of the new relationships that would be created through human cloning. As noted by Stuart (2008, pp. 50–51), the evolution of language at the time period during which the novel is set has not yet developed to account for the conflict between Iris's social identity (as Elizabeth's daughter and the granddaughter of Elizabeth's parents) and her biological identity (as Elizabeth's twin and the biological daughter of Elizabeth's parents). Hoffman has also commented upon the problematic aspect of labelling a relationship that is comprised of a 'spatial warp', whereby the child is the twin of the mother, and how this may prompt further questions about the appropriateness of the familial term of 'parent' in this context (Webster 2003, p. 765). Iris draws attention to this lexical inadequacy—'I was born of my mother, who was my identical twin. . . What words have we for that?' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 957)—and is uncertain as to how to interpret her relationship with Elizabeth given her new status as a clone: 'My mother, my twin, my mother, my matter, materia maternal, from which I was made. My mother, my self' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 899). It becomes apparent that Elizabeth has clearly not considered this consequence, assuming that their relationship status would remain the same, as she states, 'You're still my daughter. I'm still your mother', to which Iris replies, 'My twin' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 893). One solution to this predicament regarding nominal usage proposed by Davion is that individuals may simply decide how they view the status of and their relationships with clones; this could be achieved if nature is reconfigured as a social construction, allowing for greater fluidity (Davion 2006, p. 68). However, such fluidity may still pose problematic challenges when navigating the divisions created by existing terms such as mother/sister/twin, so appropriate guidance would still be necessary (Handwerker 2003, p. 117). Within biological familial relationships, for example, there may be a disparity between the views of the cloned child and those of the parent original—an incongruence that is foregrounded within the novel and further complicates the impact of reproductive choice.

Iris's lack of individuality as a clone is more than a matter of linguistics and subjectivity; it is also a matter of materiality. Before her discovery of the secret, Iris refers to a tangible intuition, 'a knowledge embedded so deeply and inarticulately within me that it might have been part of my cellular structure. A knowledge in the body, the material self'

(Hoffman 2001, loc. 196). She often details the physically palpable nature of the biological intimacy between her and her mother through womb-like depictions:

‘My mother. She was not quite a mother and more than one: home, sibling, the larger part of myself, as much to me as my limbs or bloodstream. Most of the time we seemed to move in an idyll of seamless attachment, in which our desires echoed in each other as in a watery reverberating chamber’. (Hoffman 2001, loc. 212)

There is an allusion here towards the conception of twins, moving together during a shared embryonic experience. The continued repetition of such gestational imagery highlights the intensely corporeal interconnectedness of the bond between Iris and Elizabeth:

‘We moved in our own special atmosphere, as in a semi-liquid surround, an amniotic fluid that incorporated us both and within which there was a connecting passage or cord, along which silent sounds and messages and electrical pulses travelled back and forth. We seemed to move in tandem..... She sponged me up and I felt some of her own substance passing into me along the connecting corridor, like nourishment, like juice’. (Hoffman 2001, loc. 220)

Despite the engineered method of Iris’s conception, which she discovers to have taken place in the laboratory of Rosen, McPherson & Park, the prevalence of imagery depicting the bodily processes of pregnancy demonstrates the overwhelmingly corporeal nature of their unique mother–daughter relationship. This materiality initially serves as a form of sustenance for Iris, nurturing her ‘through our interconnecting feedback loop. Our umbilical cord. She was part of me, my feeding source, my necessary mirror’ (Hoffman 2001, loc. 344) and providing the same lifeline as that of a mother to her baby in the state of pregnancy. However, rather than the mother’s autonomy being threatened by the creation of a new life from within, it is Iris who struggles to free herself from the nightmarish burden of ‘a foetal mother, clinging incubus’ (Hoffman 2001, loc. 1706). Her mother is the one who instigates a reliance and a need to remain attached, turning their relationship into a confining, suffocating experience as Iris finds that she is constantly ‘being sucked back into our oneness, the amniotic fluid’ (Hoffman 2001, loc. 914). The inescapableness of the material body draws attention to the need for physical, as well as subjective, autonomy in order to create and maintain a successful individual identity. Iris’s quest for autonomy therefore becomes dependent upon completely severing all ties from her mother in order to gain control over her own individuality: ‘The reproduction would have to acquire its own autonomous status. To become its own original’ (Hoffman 2001, loc. 2321).

Iris views autonomy as synonymous with authenticity as she questions her own status as an authentic human being: ‘was I a real, an authentic child?’ (Hoffman 2001, loc. 19). This brings under scrutiny the notion of ‘authentic’ human experience and, therefore, what it essentially means to be human. For Iris, the polarisation of what is considered to be ‘natural’ versus ‘unnatural’ serves to align her notion of authentic humanity with nature. As a clone, she refers to herself as an ‘inorganic, non-biological, non-human entirely’ (Hoffman 2001, loc. 175), explicitly using the term ‘unnatural’: ‘I was a replica, an artificial mechanism, a manufactured thing. I was *unnatural*’ (Hoffman 2001, loc. 847, my emphasis); ‘I was an alien, an impossibility come most *unnaturally* to life’ (Hoffman 2001, loc. 2087, my emphasis). The equation of what it means to be human with natural reproductive methods displays what Davion has characterised as ‘an innate intuition that cloning is unnatural’ (Davion 2006, p. 60). This intuitive bias, as shown by Iris, reflects the aforementioned societal bias within the novel generally, whereby heterosexual (natural) modes of reproduction are regarded as natural and morally good (Davion 2006, p. 60). This bias is also displayed by her wider family as Iris tries to find a new place for herself within the domestic unit of her grandparents but is subsequently rejected; as the epitome of heteronormative family values, her grandparents are unable to come to terms with her unconventional conception. Elizabeth’s sister Janey further compounds the rejection of Iris through voicing the typical rhetoric of morality and ethics that surrounds cloning, arguing that it ‘was just plain wrong,

to do it like this' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 166). The same bias and rhetoric are internalised and reiterated by Iris, who acknowledges that 'I was wrong, a mistake, a result of bad judgement' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 166).

The debates surrounding morality, ethics and NRTs are further played out within the novel through a panel discussion that Iris attends on the subject of Human Design. Professor Parakash, a radical-conservative ethicist, argues that the physical boundaries set by nature are necessary in maintaining a definitive category of humanity: 'nature has its laws! Because if we want to remain human, we have to accept our limitations!' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 1486). Parakash's role as an ethicist aligns him with morality and notions of right and wrong, where choices should be made for the good of (and on behalf of) society; again, there is evidence of Davion's aforementioned societal bias (Davion 2006) within his arguments as cloning is deemed unnatural and morally wrong. The views of Parakash are placed in direct contrast to those of Dr Donaldson, an evolutionary aestheticist who emphasises invention and experimentation: 'human design techniques were now advanced to the point where we could start using them more inventively and even playfully. We could experiment with new forms and shapes for the human body' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 1468–76). As an aestheticist, Donaldson considers human evolution as an art form, a thing of beauty; she is unhindered by political purpose or a sense of moral duty, and she uses the words 'play', 'playful' and 'playing for real' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 1476) several times when referring to advances within genetic engineering and NRTs. Although there is freedom and pleasure to be had through play, 'play' also bears implications of recklessness; unlike the responsible choice as advocated by Parakash, Donaldson's unfettered freedom of choice could be at the expense of responsibility and consideration for wider society. On the other hand, the rhetoric of constraint employed by Parakash ('laws' and 'limitations') combined with his resistance to change lend him an air of conservatism and anti-progress. The debate held between these two polarised characters emphasises that the complete polarisation of nature versus technology is ultimately not productive in negotiating the complex issues of NRT.

A possible reconciliation is in reenvisioning technology as part of the ongoing evolution of humanity. Within the novel, Donaldson proposes that technology is now a part of the evolutionary progress of humans, arguing that there 'was nothing artificial about technological experiments.... at our stage of civilization. Technology was our form of nature—our second nature, we might say' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 1505). Her view is akin to the reconfigurations proposed by Donna J. Haraway's seminal conception of the figure of the cyborg: as 'a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction', Haraway's cyborg transcends binary categories through both the confusion and reconstruction of boundaries (Haraway 1991, pp. 149–50). Being a clone, Iris is a literal manifestation of Haraway's cyborg<sup>5</sup>, but she does not initially recognise this disruptive potential and instead sees herself as an aberration, repeatedly describing herself as 'monstrous' (Hoffman 2001). The very consideration of cloning is indeed a monstrous one (Roy 2008), perhaps because, as Haraway points out, 'Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations' (Haraway 1991, p. 180); to go beyond this imaginative boundary could therefore be a risk to community. However, Haraway traces the etymology of the word 'monster' to note its agential qualities: 'Monsters share more than the word's root with the verb 'to demonstrate'; monsters signify' (Haraway 1991, p. 226). Through the gradual process of her own increasing agency, Iris eventually comes to understand that her monstrosity as a clone may signify the redefinition of the current limitations of humanity. After her encounter with Donaldson during the panel debate, Iris refers to herself as 'a hybrid' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 1733) and acknowledges her cyborg status for the first time. She begins to situate her emergent cyborg identity within Donaldson's concept of human design as evolutionary progress: 'I am new human, new woman' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 2619); 'The latest thing in evolution' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 2693).

As the body is both a physical embodiment of biological nature and a mode of engagement with technological processes, physical embodiment becomes the locus for Iris's successful reconfiguration of the dichotomy between nature and technology:

'I'm contingent and double... I'll always veer between the suspicion that I'm a highly impressive piece of organic programming and the wrenching hope that within my identikit frame there beats something like a true human heart, and that this heart is also a psyche, a soul, a spirit'. (Hoffman 2001, loc. 3634)

Through a return to the body and biology, Iris is able to (re)configure new perspectives (Roy 2008, pp. 227–8) through occupying a subject position that Vint conceives as the 'condition of epivitality', a condition that encapsulates the way in which 'life and nonlife, agency and abjection, subjects and objects blur and exchange properties' (Vint 2021, p. 1). New 'biopolitical figurations' are predicated by Vint's condition of epivitality, which calls for innovative ways to negotiate the intersection between neoliberalism and biotechnology alongside the ongoing reinvention of life (Vint 2021, pp. 2–3). Iris is able to gain an increasing sense of autonomy through her acceptance of cloning as a manifestation of the evolving synthesis between technology and biology, blurring the boundary lines and reinventing which lives may be considered as human by embracing her cyborgian monstrosity through a lens of 'becoming'.<sup>6</sup> Roy proposes a 'biophilosophies of becoming' (Roy 2018, p. 5), whereby matter is rethought in terms of flux, motion and capabilities, and biology is reframed in terms of events and processes (Roy 2018, p. 29). According to Roy, an understanding that biology is not a fixed entity alongside an appreciation of play is vital when seeking new modes of biological knowledge such as human cloning (Roy 2018, p. 10): these factors are central to revisiting attitudes towards cloning and reconstructing them in light of the constantly shifting boundaries surrounding NRT. As advocated by the novel's Dr Donaldson, playfulness allows the freedom to conceive new possibilities. However, Haraway does argue both 'for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction' (Haraway 1991, p. 150); therefore, it is important to acknowledge that responsibility is crucial when playfully experimenting with the individual right to choice regarding NRTs. This need for heightened responsibility is echoed by Vint, who argues for the importance of emphasising the collective over the individual when reimagining the body politic (Vint 2021, p. 206). Iris embodies Vint's vision for a new subject who is accountable for ethical considerations beyond the current human limitations (Vint 2021, p. 204); although she has transcended these limitations, she remains grounded in her desire for a collective, responsible choice.

This is demonstrated as Iris questions uncritical attitudes towards reproductive choice during her visit to the doctor that performed the cloning procedure for her mother: "You never thought about me, did you?... You never thought about what it would be like for me" (Hoffman 2001, loc. 1363). The doctor's reaction compounds the idea that the mother's right to choice takes precedence over any wider consequences as he replies, "If your mother has any complaints, she can write to me, or come and talk to me. She was my customer, not you" (Hoffman 2001, loc. 1385). Here, the language of consumerism exposes a neoliberal predilection towards the commodification of reproductive technologies, which Hoffman explicitly states is a threat that she aims to warn her readers of: 'Cloning is the ultimate expression of a certain commodification of the human. I'm trying to point out the dangers of this' (Webster 2003, p. 768). This affirms concerns such as those raised by Roberts (2009) and Briggs (2010) regarding the links between commodification and privilege, in that what may appear as reproductive freedom is not a freedom afforded to everyone in equal measure. Additionally, Gaard contends the supposed control that is promised by choice in a climate that sees reproduction linked with consumerism, whereby 'feminists have lost discursive control over the word "choice": instead, the term has been commodified and sold back to women as consumers of the new fertility-enhancing technologies' (Gaard 2010, p. 105). Hoffman highlights the need for retaining an element of responsibility and considering the impact that individual choices have on others by encouraging the reader to see that no choice is truly free and unhindered. Towards the end of the novel, Elizabeth finally recognises the effect that her reproductive choice has had upon her daughter, offering her apology to Iris: 'I've given you a very difficult fate—I can see that now. And I'm sorry about it. Very sorry' (Hoffman 2001, loc. 3067). Hoffman has previously spoken of



her intention for Elizabeth to realise and accept the consequences of her choices (Webster 2003, p. 767), and in admitting that she ‘didn’t think through all the consequences. We never do’ (Hoffman 2001, loc. 3119) Elizabeth concedes to the self-centred nature of her decision and her failure to consider its impact upon others. Whilst this highlights the pitfalls of irresponsible choice and selfish individualism, the attribution of blame here also suggests that the responsibility for these new reproductive technologies lies with the women who exploit them, rather than those who created them. As Handwerker has asserted, it is women, more than men, who will suffer the negative consequences of these new technologies (Handwerker 2003, p. 115). As blame is subsequently diverted from the source of scientific and technological developments, along with any accompanying implications as to the role of patriarchal power in such developments, the novel acutely reflects the challenge for women in negotiating a neoliberal society replete with choice.

*The Secret* pushes its readers towards the more pressing and urgent questions arising from ongoing developments within the field of NRT and human cloning. Elizabeth’s engagement with the reproductive choice presented to her through cloning exposes the risks of the commodification of human reproduction within a neoliberal climate, which both relies upon and perpetuates a certain kind of social privilege at the expense of the exclusion of already-marginalised groups. As a result, the novel cautions that the individual right to reproductive choice is never completely free; an awareness of external influences and a consideration of possible repercussions are integral to responsible decision-making in the context of NRT and cloning. Throughout, the voice of the clone, as presented through the narrative perspective of Iris, illustrates the need for the consequences of individual reproductive choice to be fully considered, demonstrating that the personal is always political. However, through a return to the body and biology, Iris embraces her agential monstrosity to (re)configure new perspectives (Roy 2008, pp. 227–78) and enact a new biopolitical figuration (Vint 2021, pp. 2–3). In this way, *The Secret* provides a glimpse of the potential of NRTs to exceed and redefine the current limitations of humanity.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Firestone sets out her list of demands for an alternative (feminist) system, with the first demand being ‘(1) The freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible, and the diffusion of the child-rearing role to the society as a whole, man as well as women’ (Firestone [1970] 2015, p. 114).
- <sup>2</sup> As noted by Lola Olufemi in her recent *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (Olufemi 2020, pp. 36–37).
- <sup>3</sup> Donna J. Haraway’s seminal work on the figure of the cyborg in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Haraway 1991) will be discussed in further detail later on.
- <sup>4</sup> An idea that is strikingly similar to the UK Married Couple’s Tax Allowance: see GOV.UK website, Married Couple’s Allowance, <https://www.gov.uk/married-couples-allowance>, accessed on 2 August 2023.
- <sup>5</sup> Particularly considering that cyborgs are replicated rather than reliant upon organic reproduction (Haraway 1991, p. 150).
- <sup>6</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz (2011) *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art*.

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