

BIRTHING JUSTICE

Black Women, Pregnancy, and Childbirth



Julia Chinyere Oparah and
Alicia D. Bonaparte, editors

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BLACK WOMEN, PREGNANCY, AND CHILDBIRTH

edited by
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and
Alicia D. Bonaparte

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CHAPTER 6

Confessions of a Black Pregnant Dad

Syrus Marcus Ware

Last weekend I gave a talk to a group of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Intersexed, Two Spirited, Queer, and Questioning (LGBT-TI2QQ) would-be parents. The group was diverse and included several trans parents-to-be. As I sat among them describing how we started our family, I was struck by how much has changed since we began our process. Our family journey began during a time with few resources for racialized trans parents; yet only a few years later, I was speaking to an entire classroom full of people and preparing to write a chapter about my experience as a black trans man. In 2009, I published an essay about my experience as a trans man considering getting pregnant.¹ Since I wrote that piece, a lot has happened to advance the public's understanding of trans parenting. When I first began writing, there were few resources about trans parenting: few films, few articles, and very few resources for prospective trans parents. For instance, in 2006–2007, when we were working on a new course for trans would-be dads, there was so little information generally available that we had to call doctors and surgeons and seek out trans dads and trans-friendly midwifery practices across the continent.

We first taught the course during the year that the sensationalist media pounced on the story of a pregnant dad named Thomas Beatie—thereafter referred to by most media outlets as “the Pregnant Man.” This kind of sensationalist reporting about trans issues was not new, and neither was the framing of “pregnant” and “man” as mutually exclusive. But the rendering of Beatie's experience as unimaginable, his body as unintelligible, and his life as impossible was a refocusing of transphobia, heteronormativity, and sexism into an intense warning to all other past and future trans dads. We had begun working on our course about a year before Beatie's story broke, and as we started the first run of the curriculum, it felt all the more vital following this harsh sensationalization of trans parenthood. In a way, this also pushed me to write about my experience of being a dad who gave birth. Our stories are often untold, yet likely much more plentiful than previously imagined. Since 2009, several brave masculine-identified butches and trans guys have come forward with their stories and shared their experiences with the world.² Several films and anthologies have been created about trans parenting.³ On a more personal note, my partner and I became parents—I carried our child—and we found ourselves in a small community of trans parents.

In a world with so few other pregnant and parenting trans men to act as role models, our journey entailed a million unknowns. We anticipated that being trans dads would be a huge hurdle on our road to parenthood and therefore prepared by planning how we would deal with transphobia and gender expectations. In the end, our experiences of racialization as black men raising a baby who reads as white to many has been by far one of our biggest sources of external curiosity and often frustration. What follows is a consideration of the personal and political, a contemplation of gender, parenting, and the many other things that come up when parenting outside gender-and race-based expectations.

INSEMINATION, OR “YOU ARE GOING TO STICK WHAT IN WHERE?”

My partner and I both wanted children and felt ready to become parents—as ready as you can be! We carefully weighed out our options for starting a family—fostering, adoption, using a gestational carrier, and getting pregnant. I realized that I wanted to try to get pregnant. As a trans guy, I did not feel conflicted about the idea of being pregnant and a man; in fact, I had been curious about pregnancy for a while. Once this was decided, we had another series of questions to answer: Would we use a known or unknown donor? Would we go to a fertility clinic? Would we try to do it at home? It seemed like an endless series of choices. Of course, choices are tied to many things: financial resources for buying sperm and paying for insemination at a clinic, personal connections with folks who have sperm, access to legal advice for crafting known-donor contracts, and so on. We had access to some but not all of these things. In the end, we decided to borrow some money and try the clinic route. We lovingly referred to the reproductive endocrinologist at the clinic as Dr. Baby Maker. The following is an account of our first appointment.

A few months ago we had our first appointment with Dr. Baby Maker at the Baby Making Clinic (BMC). A week before the appointment, a nurse at the clinic that referred us to the BMC called us to let us know that our application had been red-flagged. The query: “How could two men be in need of insemination?” I’m not sure why I was surprised by this; fertility clinics are still very gender-specific places where men produce sperm and women carry babies, despite the reality that in this world this is only true some of the time. I wondered if the clinic would be prepared to help a trans woman with sperm immobility to successfully get her trans male partner pregnant despite his ovarian cysts. Perhaps, perhaps not ... I worried that this early interruption in the process might be a warning sign for future complications with the clinic, but Nik and I bravely decided to continue on and give the BMC another shot. Thankfully, the nurse who referred us did some previsit advocacy on our behalf. In addition, shortly after we began at the BMC, a group of queer parenting advocates did some great trans-specific training with the clinic staff to help get them ready and up to speed to provide excellent care to their future trans clients. The clinic welcomed us and set our first appointment date for early spring 2008.

We went to our first appointment at the BMC full of anxiety and excitement. What could we expect? How long would it take? Would they call me “she”? Would I be recognized as the father, along with Nik? And, perhaps most pressing, would they have to (eep!) probe me? I had already decided that I was willing to put up with a certain level of confusion or misinformation about trans bodies if it would help us reach our goal: to get pregnant with our baby. Yet, as we sat in the waiting room, I wondered if I would be able to handle being “she’d” or having a frank discussion about my “ovaries” or menstrual cycles with a doctor. I felt confident that despite wanting to be pregnant, I was definitely still a man. I worried about the staff’s ability to recognize and respect my beliefs. I believed that as a man about to carry our child, I had a lot to offer our child in terms of questioning gender rigidity in our society and teaching the world about alternative ways of parenting. Perhaps it was this hope that got me through that time in the waiting room, unsure what to expect.

The previsit advocacy clearly worked, because during the ultrasound, the technician asked me which washroom I would prefer to use. I explained that I used the men’s washroom. She led me through a back door to the hallway by the elevator. “This is the only men’s washroom on the floor,” she said apologetically, as she led me through the twists and turns. “We don’t have too many men getting ultrasounds in this clinic.” This seemed like an extreme understatement. I would guess that I was one of the first men ever to be a client in that part of the clinic.

PREGNANT MAN CLAIMS HE IS A PREGNANT MAN

My second encounter with the BMC was later in the spring of 2008, a few weeks after Thomas Beatie burst onto the global scene with his story of insemination and pregnancy, becoming widely known as “the world’s first pregnant man.” Of course, there have been other pregnant trans guys before Beatie, but his decision to share his story brought to light the reality of male pregnancy for many people for the first time. Media headlines exclaimed, “The Pregnant Man: Is This a Hoax?” and “Man Claims He Is Pregnant”—as if this was clearly an impossible and preposterous idea. Even Oprah got in the mix with a long interview with Beatie. I suppose it is a mark of some progress that the headlines questioned the pregnancy rather than the fact that Beatie was a man. My experience of pregnancy was very much reflective of this. My being pregnant seemed to call into question my gender identity and my preferred pronoun not only among strangers, which was perhaps understandable, but also, surprisingly, among those closest to me. The idea that pregnancy is an experience exclusive to women is reinforced over and over in the media, the classroom, and everyday conversation. In fact, not all people who identify as women can get pregnant, and many people who do not identify as women can. To return to the media headlines, it is worth considering the fact that the media questioned whether Beatie was pregnant rather than accepting his pregnancy and then questioning his gender.

Absent from much of the reporting about Beatie was any discussion of race or his experience of racialization. I feel this is indicative of the ways that racialized LGBTTI2QQ people are often forced to separate out our experiences rather than being able to talk about the interconnected and multiple identities that make up who we are. I’m not suggesting that Beatie had much say in the reporting about his pregnancy or about the initial telling of his story. The media homed in on his trans identity and used this as the hook to sell a sensationalized version of his story. He went on to write an autobiography, perhaps in part to reclaim control of the telling of his story.⁴ I read his book because I wanted to understand more about his experience as a mixed-race person. Beatie doesn’t talk too much about his own experience of race-based thinking and racialization in the book.⁵ This omission left me feeling that a crucial part of this discussion about trans parenting was missing. My experience of being a trans parent is intimately connected to my experience of being a racialized parent and a parent of a mixed-race child. I’m not suggesting that Beatie should have to talk about his experience of racialization because he is in a racialized body—far too often racialized folks are expected to talk about race as always already central to our experiences of the world. I am not trying to replicate this process. However, as a reader, I was looking for some reflection of—or contrast to—my own experience.

I am not alone in noting this absence. Mitsuru Mitsuru, a guest writer for the online publication *Racialicious*, writes about this omission in a review of Beatie’s book: “So I heard a while ago that celeb transman Thomas Beatie is a mixie much like myself. He too has a white mama, an Asian daddy, and originally, an Asian surname. He too was born with all the plumbing to make and be pregnant with a baby. And like me, he too made the decision to get folks to recognize him as male.”⁶ Like Mitsuru, I identify as a mixed-race trans man, and like Beatie, I chose to get “pregnant with a baby.” And I too wanted to find more connection on all of these grounds with Beatie—with someone (anyone?) else who might share the experience of being of color, trans, and a parent. I yearned for this because in the end, my family’s experience of

racialization has affected our daily interactions with the public much more than gender.

Our child has very light brown skin and blue eyes—blue, the color of my grandfather’s eyes. Strangers ask us, “Why are her eyes blue?” while we are in line at the supermarket. They say, “Wow, she sure is a different color than you,” when we are trying to get our stroller onto the bus. They question, “Where are her parents?” when we are feeding her in the park. Although this doesn’t happen in every interaction with people outside our family, it happens with such alarming frequency that it seems to me that it has become a weekly, if not daily, occurrence. It’s funny how much we prepared for the potential transphobia that could threaten our future family. I spent so much time trying to be prepared for being a pregnant man and then a trans dad. I didn’t think to prepare for being a black man raising a baby who reads to many as white. I wanted to be ready for those who would challenge our family because of the fact that Nik and I are trans guys. Instead, it turns out that not much has changed since my early childhood as a mixed-race kid in the 1970s. I remember people staring at us brown kids with our white mum and black dad. I remember them asking unwanted questions about our family and expressing concerns about how being mixed race would be too confusing for us—leading to a “life of angst and worry.”

In 2012, it seems that we are facing many of the same issues. We prepared for being challenged because my body might look different from those of other dads in the playground. Now we are preparing for a future in which we are also challenged because our skin colors look different from our child’s. And I’m sure we will one day face challenges based on an intersection of these two experiences of difference.

Things have gotten a lot easier now that Amelie is talking, running up to me, shouting, “Papa, papa!” But the questions continue. On the way home from her day care last week, a man stopped us at the bus stop. He asked, “Is this your baby, or are you the babysitter?” I confirmed that I was Amelie’s parent. He said, with palpable disdain and sadness in his voice, “No! She is *so* white! And you are ...” his voice trailed off, and he gestured with his hand disapprovingly at my face. And I wanted to scream. The implication was that I am “too black,” that black is awful, and that Amelie, reading as white, deserves to be in a better family than ours, a family of color. Instead of screaming, I looked at Amelie. She smiled at me, said, “Papa. ABCD?” and launched into her jumbled version of her favorite song. We walked to the next stop, and along the way I wondered how we were going to manage these kinds of interactions, especially as Amelie becomes more and more conscious of “grown-up” conversations. As we learn how together, I find myself seeking kinship with other trans dads of color, and Thomas Beatie’s story becomes all the more relevant to me.

The story of Beatie’s first pregnancy came out about a year after we ran the first session of “Trans Fathers 2B,” a fourteen-week parenting course for trans guys considering parenting, run through the Queer Parenting Program at the 519 Community Centre and the Parenting Network in Toronto. The course was run by a trans man who had practiced midwifery for years and was working as a labor and delivery nurse at a local hospital. There were seven people enrolled in the course. We—a group of people who were going to become parents, something that bonded us all together—met in a child-themed playroom at the Metro Central YMCA. Our discussions focused on how to talk to other parents and family members about our decisions to parent, how to handle transphobia on the playground, and how to advocate for ourselves around our gender preferences and identities while, say, in the throes of labor. We also worked with our course facilitators to push for the inclusion of a session focused on the experience of racialization and things to consider when

parenting children who look different from you or adopting/fostering kids from different communities than your own. In retrospect, I wish that we had spent more than one session talking about this, brainstorming with other parents-to-be. I guess it's true that you can't anticipate the kinds of questions you may have until you have them. At the time, I couldn't imagine what our child would look like and couldn't anticipate that she would look so much like my mother. As a mixed-race person, I was very aware that any donor we chose would affect what our child looked like. I had always experienced being "different" in both my parents' families—"too black" in my mum's family and "too white" in my dad's. But during our course, I couldn't get past thinking about gender and pregnancy. I wrote this about my early pregnancy:

I have realized that to be a pregnant man is to be a spectacle. Male or not, public attitudes about pregnancy render the pregnant person an object of public display. Every stranger you meet is likely to touch your belly without asking and give you a laundry list of suggestions for what you should be doing throughout your pregnancy. But being a pregnant man adds a new level of publicity. Not only are you pregnant, but you might, like me, have a short beard. I've had top surgery and have a man's name. When I meet other people who have been pregnant, they usually spend the entire conversation staring from my belly to my lack of breasts to my beard and back again, which can make for distracted exchanges. I'm really excited to be able to carry our child, but it is not without the challenge of feeling ultimately different in this world, connecting two puzzle pieces that don't belong together. I am torn between wanting to proclaim my pregnancy to the world, inevitably rendering me female to even my friends and family, and wanting to remain seen as masculine, thus seeming inevitably not-pregnant. I suppose that's why I am so enamored and in awe of Thomas Beatie. His willingness to publicly announce his pregnancy has brought the concept of men being pregnant to the general public. His publicity has made pregnant and man no longer oxymoronic, but rather something that happens in this world. Of course, there were and are many men before him who became pregnant. He is not the first and is not the last pregnant man. But his very visibility has created a shift in our understanding of who it is in this world who gets pregnant, and has made it easier for me to explain my situation to other people, simply answering their blank stares with the phrase, "You, know, like Thomas Beatie, the Pregnant Man!"

Despite the fact that I am not the first trans guy to be going through this, the world still sees trans male pregnancy as a highly unusual event. And at least at this moment in history, it's not the most common way to bring a child into the world. But that doesn't mean that the systems in place to help people have families should be any less welcoming or prepared for trans parents-to-be. Over the past several months, Dr. Baby Maker has been a supportive and encouragingly optimistic part of our health-care team. He may not fully grasp all the terminology and concepts related to trans bodies, but he has truly put all of his efforts into helping us begin our family. For this I am eternally grateful.

I am thankful for the many sessions in the Trans Fathers 2B course in which we practiced dealing with other parents, with strangers, with our families, with other children who might not understand our genders, or who might be critical of trans parenting. Through scenarios, discussions, and workshops on self-advocacy, I feel more prepared to deal with questions like: "Hey ... Is that your mom or your dad?" at our child's best friend's third birthday party. I am also thankful for the ever changing, ever growing network of trans parents out there who are sharing resources, support, creativity and resilience; through face-to-face meetings, online forums, and courses like Trans Fathers 2B.

Now I realize that if I could ask Thomas Beatie anything, it would be this: What do you say to people who impose race-based thinking immediately upon meeting your children? How do you talk to your kids about race?

LABOR PAINS

I developed preeclampsia and had to deliver our child early. We rushed to the hospital with trepidation—we had been planning a home birth, complete with candles, a warm tub, and a few rounds of Scrabble. Most importantly, our plan allowed us to have some control over who would be present at the birth of our child and to sidestep the potential pitfalls and transphobia we might experience as trans dads in labor at a large public hospital. Yet here we were, en route to the hospital, with no hospital bag, no Scrabble board, and no idea what to expect in the coming hours. Our midwife sensed our concern when we met her in triage. Because of the seriousness of my health condition and the fact that I was going to require extensive medications and a possible C-section, she had to transfer care to an attending physician. I was terrified. I worried about the preeclampsia, I worried about the baby, and I worried how I was going to deal with the hyperfeminizing world I was about to enter: the Mom and Baby Unit of a big hospital. Before leaving us in the care of our new doctor, our midwife went around to the entire team we would be working with to advocate for us—to ensure that we were called by our chosen names and addressed as our preferred gender. I will be forever grateful that she did this. As each round of nurses, doctors, and anesthetists came in and out of our room, they consistently referred to us correctly—it was incredible. Our identities were not just respected; in fact, they were validated in new and interesting ways. I ended up having to have an emergency C-section after thirty-four hours of induced labor. The surgeon who performed the operation told me when I was in recovery that he believed my having a “male pelvis” had resulted in a longer surgery than expected. Rather than sounding disparaging, he said, encouragingly, “It’s great news, really. It means the hormones are doing what they should!” I was not prepared for this somewhat misplaced but well-intentioned support of my body, my life, and our family.

POSTSCRIPT

After my labor, the other questions began. It wasn't whether I would be Dad or Mum that predominated our first family outings; instead, they were shaped by a society bent on racialization and vocalized amazement about difference within family groupings. I wrote this shortly after having Amelie:

Now that we have had our baby, I realize that, though there are many wonderful and difficult things about being a trans dad, some of the biggest issues we face on a near daily basis are not related to gender at all.

As a trans dad, my gender identity is challenged in several ways. Two particularly difficult challenges are being called mum a lot instead of dad by strangers and loved ones alike, and regrowing chest tissue as a result of chest-feeding my baby. We are under a particular kind of scrutiny about how we are raising our baby in relation to gender: We were recently questioned by a family member if we are putting Amelie in pink enough—enough to show that we are not making gender “confusing” for her. We are required to show that we are not making gender confusing to our five month old by instilling in them a clear sense of pink, blue and two distinct genders. These experiences are frustrating.

But none of these examples have affected our family as much as the way that race-based thinking is projected on the tiniest of humans. It's truly terrifying to watch. It propels me to imagine a different world, one where we could live in communities that did not impose the notion of two genders and two sexes on our children, and one where race-based thinking and racialization was not a principal organizing factor for our society. I feel pulled to create this kind of home, this community with every fiber in my body, not only for us but for our children's children.

We are part of a growing network of trans parents, many of whom are from racialized communities, and among this group we are seeking solace. Within our trans and LGBTQTTI2QQ parenting community, we have had a chance to celebrate our new family, our differences, and our identities as trans dads.