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Teman’s in depth exploration of surrogates and intended mothers offers a fascinating glimpse into a post-modern world of reproductive capabilities. The book is a sympathetic and informative ethnography that delves into a community of women negotiating the process and practice of surrogate pregnancy. Throughout her writing, Teman does an excellent job giving voice to the women whose stories are rarely heard and framing their narratives amidst larger cultural and social frameworks of intelligibility. She begins the book by addressing claims regarding surrogacy as a cultural anomaly and the cultural politics of surrogate motherhood; following the introduction the book is divided into four parts: Dividing, Connecting, Separating, and Redefining each section dealing with a stage in the process of *Birthing a Mother*.

In early 2008, Teman tells the reader, surrogacy became a hot topic in the popular press as well as a variety of academic fields. Inquiries about the ethical, legal, and social issues surrounding the commodification of motherhood and children began to surface across disciplines and media outlets. Contentious debates for and against surrogacy emerged, however, media hype accounted for only a few anomalous situations and academic tropes of exploitation relied almost entirely on theory and no actual fieldwork. None gave voice to the women involved in the process; *Birthing a Mother* fills this void. Teman takes, “a fresh look at surrogacy” and attempts to “completely rethink what we know about this reproductive practice by taking the experiences of persons immediately involved in it at face value and trying to understand what surrogacy means to them, in their own words” (p. 3). The in-depth ethnographic fieldwork offered in this book is a superb account of surrogacy is Israel. Israel is a country where surrogacy is not only legal...
and paid for by insurance companies, but also thought by the government to be a “positive solution to infertility, in line with the strong reproductive imperative that has historically characterized the country’s approach to reproductive technologies” (12). In a setting like Israel, where cultural ideals have extremely high regard for motherhood, family, and baring children the very concepts being negotiated in surrogacy are amplified.

Part one of the book, “Dividing,” looks at the ways surrogates experience the process of carrying another woman’s baby, and how the surrogate negotiates the meanings of nature, motherhood, and family by inscribing symbolic lines of demarcation on her body. Surrogates employ complex body mapping metaphors to delineate the role their body plays in the pregnancy. While some see the process as a form of babysitting and others imagine their uterus a greenhouse, all focus on how the heart, the flow of blood, the womb, and the fetus itself work together to keep the belly disconnected from the rest of the body. The detailed and extensive processes of detachment each surrogate employs work to maintain their role as surrogate and the baby they carry as explicitly not theirs.

One of the best stories Teman extrapolates from the women’s experiences tells of the role food plays in their body mapping process. Many of the women claimed the culinary cravings of their surrogate pregnancy were tied to the ethnicity of the fetus rather than of their own heritage. Yael tells of her Iraqi surrogate’s desire for a Moroccan style soup, a soup Yael grew up eating in Morocco and one her surrogate had tasted only once prior to the pregnancy.

Part two of the book, “Connecting,” concentrates on the relationship that forms between the intended mother and the surrogate. The “claiming practices” that establish each woman’s role, identity, and status work to symbolically remove the fetus from the surrogates body and append it to the intended mother’s. Teman conceptualized two forms of claiming practices, kin claiming and maternal claiming; both of which work to provide the intended mother a sense of security in their role as rightful mother. Kin claiming practices focus on rendering attachments to the expected child whereas maternal
claiming involves techniques aimed at the social label of mother to be. For the intended mothers engaging in kin claiming practices, the abstract fetal entity presents the dual challenge of cultivating a belief in the realness of the object of expectation while also creating an emotional attachment to it. Some intended mothers carried pictures of sonographs with them at all times and others engaged in what Teman call medical merging. In these cases, the intended mother’s name was listed on all pregnancy related forms creating a sense of interchangeability between the two women. The intended mothers who engaged in maternal claiming focused their energies on creating physical and emotional connections between themselves and the surrogate. Due to the intense connectedness between the women, some intended mothers experienced bodily changes that acted as a sort of vicarious pregnancy. These physical appropriations of pregnancy, what Teman calls pseudopregnant embodiment, helped both the surrogate and the intended mother negotiate their roles in the process while also creating marriage like bond between the women. A bond that often came to an abrupt end after the baby was born.

Part three of the book, “Separating,” examines the post birth period when the medical system and state emerge to ritually separate the women. For example, intended mothers are often given beds in the hospital’s maternity ward whereas the surrogate is moved to another part of the hospital, specifically away from the baby and the lawful mother. Teman refers to these “boundary marking mechanisms” and the “medical gatekeepers” who enforce them as a “symbolic act in which the body politic claims the child as its own; the state is revealed as having commissioned the child’s birth itself” (195). For some intended mothers and surrogates, this practice is extremely jarring as the bond between them is suddenly broken. More so, whereas during the pregnancy the closeness between the women prevented the surrogacy arrangement from being cast in terms of commodification, this immediate rupture often retrospectively compartmentalizes the intimacy between the women as “extra services” rendered.

Part four of the book, “Redefining,” conceptualizes the surrogates journey as a quest or odyssey that leads the women to acquire self-definition and self-knowledge. This
section is problematic. Here, Teman jumps back to the period before the pregnancy to discuss the logistics of becoming a surrogate. It is noteworthy that the difficulties of becoming a surrogate are not discussed until this final stage in the book. Until this point, Teman’s accounts of surrogacy articulate a generally positive experience for all parties, however, here we learn of the many logistical difficulties and disparities in treatment towards surrogates. Furthermore, in this section we come to understand how many surrogates utilize masculinized notions of “strength” and “endurance” as needed to prevail in the “battle” of surrogacy. Teman’s desire to further masculinize this process by situating the surrogate’s stories within Campbell’s monomyth framework is also questionable. Until this point in her book, men are hardly mentioned – even the husbands’ roles in the pregnancy are largely ignored. To suddenly draw upon male ideas of a quest and masculine notions of empowerment as a means of describing the entirety of the process seems to weaken many of Teman’s prior arguments about surrogacy as not adhering to bio-political control mechanisms or women’s bodies as cyber-machines whose only purpose is reproduction. It seems antithetical to her work as a whole that in attempt to claim surrogacy as a process in which women are liberated from the binds of infertility Teman must rely on male metaphors and ways of thinking.

In the conclusion of the book, however, Teman redeems herself. She does an excellent job rearticulating how an ethnographic study, whereby one talks to individuals and listens to their stories, can change the perception of a cultural practice. The detailed accounts of extensive body-mapping and maintenance of personal boundaries unearthed through deep conversation challenge theoretical ideas about “postmodern procreation” and the unnatural uses of medical technology as a means of outsourcing women’s bodies. Furthermore, while her ability to culturally situate the surrogacy process within Israel throughout the book is well done, in the final chapter it is exceptional and particularly revealing. Her claim that the average Israeli woman suffers from upwards of 25 miscarriages before they embark on surrogacy, in comparison to women in the United States who look to surrogacy after only four miscarriages, is striking and does an stellar job situating her research within Israeli’s ideologies of reproduction and nation state
building. Teman leaves us to wonder what kind of impact a national investment in maternity has on women and how might the “disembodied wombs” which produce “state-commissioned citizens” reaffirm patriarchal views of family or radically alter them.