

preface

Recent years have produced startling changes in the practices of motherhood, an institution always historically conditioned but now reshaped by postmillennial technologies and neoliberal economics. This issue of *Feminist Studies* brings together a number of important essays that illustrate, analyze, and critique current developments in a range of social and historical contexts. Their geographical sites include Egypt, India, and the United States—assisted reproduction clinics, surrogate mothers' hostels, Ghanaian-American kitchens, child custody courts, rural garbage dumps, breastfeeding chairs, and mothers' beds. They address who can be a mother, the gendering of parents and children, how states seek to limit and to enforce motherhood, and what social choices determine who pays the costs and privileges of parenthood.

The issue begins with Rajani Bhatia's essay, "Constructing Gender from the Inside Out: Sex-Selection Practices in the United States," which won the 2009 *Feminist Studies* Award for the best essay written by a graduate student accepted in that year. A feminist familiar with critiques of preferences for boys in India, Bhatia studies experimental and commercial practices that now allow families in the United States to select the sex of a child. Even though many of the well-off white women who use these services select girls rather than boys as their offspring, she still finds such practices problematic. Bhatia analyzes the rhetorics of popular journalism and pro-parenting Web sites to show how U.S. mothers tie gender to children's sex and simultaneously create identities for themselves as mothers who fantasize about the pleasures of sharing ballet lessons and Barbie dolls with their daughters. Although their participants see themselves as empowered by the choices of new technologies and the market, Bhatia suggests that the analysis of "sex selection as a form of gender-based violence" in the less developed world might apply as well to the new tech-

nologies of sperm sorting and sex selection among privileged parents in the United States.

Amrita Pande's essay, 'At Least I Am Not Sleeping with Anyone': Resisting the Stigma of Commercial Surrogacy in India," describes another sector of the brave new world of contemporary reproduction in her ethnography of commercial surrogates in India. Women who work as surrogates are paid to carry to term, and relinquish at birth, the fertilized zygote of a contracting person or couple. These women face severe social stigma for performing this labor; one described the public opinion of surrogates as women who "sell our body and then our baby." Pande describes the emotional and rhetorical work that accompanies the gestational labor of surrogates, as the women morally distance themselves from prostitution and from being someone who would "give away our own child." Although gestational surrogacy has been both defended as a reproductive "choice" and condemned for victimizing economically vulnerable women, Pande describes a more complex process in which women resist being treated as "merely a vessel" by seeing the baby they carry as the product of their blood. They resist the stigma of baby selling by equating the relinquishment of the newborn to giving a daughter away at marriage, and they explain the decision to work as a surrogate as both a necessity compelled by economic circumstances and a calling from God. In the process of shaping a rhetoric of resistance to stigma, the surrogates both transform and reproduce gendered relations of power.

Before surrogate mothers or sperm sorting, the work of reproduction included African American midwives of the earlier twentieth century, whose stories are still being told and being revised to fit histories of female solidarity more beneficent than the women's actual experiences. In "Downplaying Difference: Historical Accounts of African American Midwives and Contemporary Struggles for Midwifery," Christa Craven and Mara Glatzel discuss the racial politics of voice and resistance in the memoirs of midwives. Although some memoirs gave voice to the midwives' strategies for acting within a segregated society and resisting a racist medical establishment that deemed them dirty and their techniques and herbal remedies as backwards and dangerous, others obfuscate the racial injustice inflicted upon African American midwives and the racism inherent in attempts to prevent them from practicing.

In her review essay about new reproductive technologies, “Reproductive Technology: Of Labor and Markets,” Laura Briggs asks questions that, like Bhatia’s, may redefine feminist positions on reproductive rights and reveal relations of power obscured in dominant narratives. In this case, Briggs takes on both the ahistoricism of work on new reproductive technologies and a dominant narrative that, with a few notable exceptions, naturalizes reproductive technology and focuses on success stories that end with pregnancy and birth, not on those more common efforts that bring only impoverishment and pain. Recent feminist scholarship on reproductive technology rebukes an earlier framework that treated these technologies solely as forms of exploitation. However, merely to celebrate these technologies as enhancements of reproductive choice hides what Briggs identifies as the “central fact of reproductive technologies”—the “epochal shift in reproduction” that makes them necessary. Transformations in the economy accompanied by an ethic of “personal responsibility” force many women to manage the incompatibilities of mothering and work by delaying childbearing and increasing their risk of infertility. Employers are no longer forced to pay the family wage that allowed one worker in a couple to stay at home; nor are employers forced to provide childcare, fund it through taxes, or provide paid family leave. Feminism, Briggs concludes, can and should envision a better world for families than this.

Illustrating the importance of socio-economic class in shaping the experience of motherhood is Ruby C. Tapia’s essay, “Race, Class, and the Photopolitics of Maternal Re-Vision in Rickie Solinger’s *Beggars and Choosers*,” which describes the photographic exhibit of contemporary U.S. mothers that Ricky Solinger curated. In contrast to Edward Steichen’s famous exhibit of 1955, *The Family of Man*, Solinger’s exhibit, *Beggars and Choosers*, avoids the sentimental consolations of humanist universals, as is clear, for example, from Tapia’s comparison of photographs of migrant mothers in the two exhibits. Instead, *Beggars and Choosers* explores the contexts in which mothers define themselves and are socially defined, especially in conditions of poverty and racial discrimination, even in photographs that appear traditional, such as that of a mother peacefully breastfeeding her baby, as well as in ones in which the mother is incarcerated or working in the fields, with no child visible.

A changing economy that transformed the uses of reproductive technology is a major force in Laura Bier's essay, "The Family Is a Factory': Gender, Citizenship, and the Regulation of Reproduction in Postwar Egypt." Bier studies how women reacted to family-planning policies instituted by the Egyptian state. Like the Indian surrogates studied by Pande, Egyptian women both challenged and reproduced narratives about the gendered body and modern family. Like both Pande and Briggs, Bier rejects the binary of consent and coercion "often used to frame reproductive politics in non-Western contexts." Instead, she offers a rich history of the reproductive policies adopted to further the project of building a nation based on the principles of Arab socialism. The regime promised to transform Egypt into an industrialized modern state but saw the project threatened by high fertility rates. It portrayed the provision of birth control as a matter of social justice and the women who were to use it as active agents who controlled both their own reproductive destinies and the destiny of the nation. But many Egyptian women had their own vision of their reproductive destiny. Rather than using birth control to limit their family size, they used it to provide respite time after childbirth or during periods of economic difficulty. At the same time, some women adopted both the state's narrative of the modern family and the family planning required to realize it. But by the 1970s the failure of Egypt's family-planning program was widely acknowledged. What is interesting, then, is the transformation in family size that followed shortly thereafter: in the last twenty years the fertility rate fell from 5.3 to 3.5 births per woman. This, Bier argues, is the result of the social and economic hardships wrought by neoliberal economic politics. Thus, the essays in this issue demonstrate how the globalizing economy has restructured reproductive regimes and the negotiations of women within them.

Alternative family structures are explored in Psyche Williams-Forsen's auto-ethnography, "Other Women Cooked for My Husband: Negotiating Gender, Food, and Identities in an African American/Ghanaian Household." Williams-Forsen deconstructs glib clichés about Othermothering in her careful analysis of both supports and tensions between the expectations of her own African American upbringing and culinary practices and those of her Ghanaian husband and in-laws. She resists the "culinary

adultery” of some other women’s food entering her house to accommodate her husband’s African tastes, although she also recognizes that in diasporic communities a sense of continuity may be created by the smells and tastes of traditional foods. In her “intercultural black household,” she explains, “home,” can be viewed as a complex “culinary landscape of gender, race, and ethnic negotiation, compromise, and accommodation.” It is also a site marked by distinctions of social class, as her in-laws accept her varying from traditional gender roles in part because they recognize her cultural status as a university professor.

Another kind of conflict exists within nuclear families, as Cindy Elmore shows in her nonfiction essay, “On and On, Over and Over: The Gender War in Child Support Enforcement Court.” She describes the stresses along class and gender lines that fracture families and burden both custodial and noncustodial parents. Although she hears the “gender war” starting in arguments between parents in the corridors, she claims that it is inside the courtroom that the nation’s poor come to work out the costs of raising children, and they receive no assurance that the children’s needs will, in fact, be met. Sharon Erby’s short story, “Pushing,” also focuses on the burdens of working-class women. It details a rough but typical day in the life of a woman garbage collector whose possibilities for intensive mothering, sexual fulfillment, or even a pain-free working shift are curtailed by her economic situation. In contrast, Lyn Lifshin, in her poem “My Mother and the Bed,” tells a more traditional feminist tale of the self-definitions and interconnections of mothers, daughters, and the quotidian tasks of housework and care: the mother still thinks of her adult daughter’s life, the poet says, “as a bed only she/can make right.”

Throughout this issue of *Feminist Studies*, with its attention chiefly on new reproductive technologies and changing patterns of motherhood, differences between women according to nationality, “race”/ethnicity, and social class clearly structure women’s life trajectories. And such differences also structure the relationships between the subjects of analysis treated here, their researchers—some of whom are also their own subjects—and us, the feminist readers of academic journals.

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