Review of Elly Teman’s *Birthing a Mother*

The ethical implications of modern medical technology are a rich source of debate. Reproductive technologies are especially contentious. Among these, gestational surrogacy is fraught with controversy. Elly Teman’s *Birthing a Mother* tackles the subject of gestational surrogacy from an unbiased anthropological perspective, offering new insight to the discussion of the body’s role in the social construction of maternity and the ways in which gestational surrogates and intended mothers navigate and reinterpret the social landscape of maternal bodies. The body has long been a subject of inquiry to anthropologists: As Margaret Lock wrote, “the body mediates all reflection and action upon the world” (Lock 1993:133). However, anthropologists have until recently been more concerned with the significance of the relationship between culture and the physical body, relying on abstract philosophical inquiries and overlooking the subject’s ethnographic significance (134). Teman’s ethnography focuses on the social relationship between surrogate and the intended parents in Israel, aiming to provide an objective, in-depth ethnographic analysis of the relationship between the social construction of maternity and the lived experiences of the women involved.

Motherhood is a socially defined role, and much of the unease surrounding surrogacy stems from the dilemma of how to classify it. A pregnant woman who willingly gives up the baby she delivered challenges many traditional notions of how motherhood is socially recognized as well as culturally ascribed constructions of feminine nature. In spite of prolific interdisciplinary research into surrogacy, Teman criticizes the bias prevalent in most of this work, which she attributes to a lack of empirical data and a tendency to focus on the moral implications of surrogacy. The bias that has predominated discussions of surrogacy are manifestations of the general unease with the subject and perpetuate the myths surrounding surrogacy that reinforce moral discomfort. As Teman explains in the introductory chapter, her intention is to dispel this bias: “I view the underlying assumption that surrogacy is necessarily traumatic for surrogates as eclipsing the meaning of the process for surrogates themselves” (2010:30). Using an interpretive, ethnographic approach, Teman presents an unbiased account of surrogacy from the perspectives of the intended mothers who elect to use surrogates as well as from the surrogates themselves, whom Teman calls the “women behind the
womb” (2). Through interviews with intended mothers and surrogates, Teman’s ethnography elucidates the social relationship that develops between the intended mother and the surrogate and how traditional notions of motherhood are redefined by the contractual agreement between the women.

Research for Teman’s comprehensive fieldwork was conducted between 1998 and 2005 in Israel, where surrogacy is legal and heavily regulated by a pronatalist government. In addition, Israel provides an interesting field site because of the intersection of nationalist and religious ideas about reproduction (Teman 2010:4-6). Teman interviewed both gestational surrogates and intended mothers, all of whom were Jewish Israeli and lived throughout the country. Most surrogates were single mothers, and a few were quite educated and of a higher socio-economic status than the intended parents. The surrogates in this study represent three different economic backgrounds with the majority (70%) being well below middle class. The book is organized into four sections. The first two address the way the surrogate and intended mother come to terms with the pregnancy and reinterpret their bodies by “dividing” or “shifting” in response to the pregnancy as well as the intricate social relationship that forms between the two women. Part three deals with the separation of the surrogate from the intended mother that occurs at the birth with the transfer of the baby from surrogate’s womb to intended mother’s custody. After the birth of the child, the contractual relationship between the two women ceases, and their relationship is reformulated. The ways in which the surrogate and mother redefine their relationship is the topic of Teman’s final section.

Rather than present surrogacy strictly in terms of a contractual agreement, Teman’s data represents the collaborative effort that exists between the surrogate and the intended parents as each woman learns to embody and/or disembody motherhood. In Israel, the government heavily regulates surrogacy, and the way the surrogate and the intended parents negotiate social relationships within the contractual framework is an important area of anthropological inquiry. As Teman shows, surrogacy is a very relevant field of inquiry for anthropological examinations of the body and fits well with Van Wolputte’s emphasis on the importance of the body to anthropological understanding of selfhood: “the history of the body (both as an object of study and as an analytical
metaphor) . . . is a history of notions of self, person, and subject” (Van Wolputte 2004:252).

The title of Teman’s book reflects the central theme revealed by her extensive ethnographic fieldwork. The surrogates in Teman’s study, by detaching themselves emotionally from their wombs and allowing the intended mother to experience pregnancy vicariously, invested great effort in the process by which their intended mothers came to know themselves as mothers. Surrogacy, and the reproductive functions of the female body in general, are often discussed in capitalist metaphors – renting a womb, outsourcing a womb – as well as metaphors of colonialism. Many feminist scholars, such as Emily Martin, have written about how the reproductive processes of the female body are controlled and regulated by medical authorities. Within the biomedical system, the female body is often conceptualized as a machine, which leads to its conceptual fragmentation and the subsequent alienation of women from their own bodies (Teman 2010:101). Rather than discuss how capitalist models of reproduction are imposed and inscribed on the female body, Teman focuses on how surrogates and intended mothers both use this framework to their advantage. Teman argues that the Israeli surrogates actively use this fragmentation to their own advantage as they seek to distance themselves from the fetus (Teman 2010:101-104). The intended mother also takes advantage of the medical surveillance system. The surrogate’s agency is abdicated to the intended mother, who takes responsibility for managing the surrogate’s medical treatment. Intended mothers also served as mediators between the surrogate and her doctors, and when a medical decision had to be made, both the surrogate and the doctors deferred to the intended mother.

Teman’s book provides a much-needed ethnographic framework for addressing the contested issue of surrogacy. The author’s major accomplishment is her ability to provide a comprehensive response to the concerns raised by many feminists regarding the potential for surrogacy to reduce women to their reproductive functions. Overall, Teman’s book provides a refreshingly new perspective not only on surrogacy, but also on how the reproductive body negotiates strictly defined social categories. Teman focuses exclusively on the individual women involved – the surrogate and the intended mother – and by attempting to understand surrogacy from their perspective, presents an unbiased
reinterpretation of notions of motherhood and the maternal body’s role in constructing femininity. Her well-balanced analysis presents cases that work well for the surrogate as well as cases that have devastating psychological and emotional consequences.

Surrogacy presents an interesting theoretical conundrum in anthropology. By taking an ethnographic focus Teman is successful in dispelling many of the myths that perpetuate the anxiety around surrogacy and which portray the surrogates in particular as deviants. Her research provides an enlightening look into the ways women detach motherhood from the body in response to modern reproductive technology. Her approach allowed her to uncover the claiming practices and other methods intended mothers employ to feel involved in the pregnancy and develop relationships with the fetus as well as the conceptual techniques surrogates use to disembodify the fetus and detach themselves emotionally from the pregnancy.

Despite the need to overcome the theoretical redundancy that has surrounded the phenomenon of surrogacy, Teman’s book is only the first step in a comprehensive ethnographic reanalysis of surrogacy. Teman gives voice to the women involved in the surrogate-intended mother relationship, but the intended fathers and the families of the surrogate are absent. Also important to note is that Teman’s fieldwork was carried out in Israel, where the practice is heavily regulated by the government. Although Teman’s analysis of surrogacy in Israel welcomes the opportunity to reevaluate the universal ethical implications of surrogacy in general, it certainly doesn’t nullify the need to vigilantly consider the potentially exploitative nature of unregulated surrogacy. While much of the focus on surrogacy, especially in the media, has centered on cases of wealthy couples that hire poor surrogates in developing countries, the ethical implications of these situations remain in question.

In Birthing a Mother, Elly Teman has created a rich source of information not only for anthropologists concerned with issues of the body, but also medical professionals, journalists, and policy makers, as well as the general public. Teman avoids academic jargon to present the stories of Israeli surrogates and intended mothers, inviting both professionals and laypersons to suspend their own assumptions and reconsider surrogacy from the perspectives of those who have lived it. Hopefully, other social scientists will pick up on Teman’s research, exploring these themes in other cultural
contexts, and applying them to ethical investigations of surrogacy in nations where poor women are often exploited due to a lack of regulations.

**Sources**

Lock, Margaret


Sharp, Lesley A.


Teman, Elly


Van Wolputte, Steven