

EPILOGUE

Transnational Surrogacy and the Neoliberal Mother India

In the '60s, the introduction of the birth control pill took the risk of “making babies” out of sex. Today, new technologies have taken sex out of the act of “making babies.” And globalization is making it affordable. Now all one needs is a credit card. Instructions can be found on YouTube.

—*Google Baby*

ZIPPI BRAND FRANK'S 2009 documentary *Google Baby* opens with this meliorist account of how technology has transformed reproduction into an act determined less by chance than by the market. In doing so it draws a series of equivalences between different historical moments and technologies, comparing the 1960s invention of the birth control pill (with its feminist implications of taking away the “risk” of unintended pregnancies), to new reproductive technologies for “making babies.” The inexorable logic of this movement elides the very different implications of these technologies and moments, not least of which is how new reproductive technologies translate the contingencies of biology and circumstance (sexual orientation, age, infertility) into a problem of the market: “All one needs is a credit card.” One way this elision works is through the quotation's address: just as the birth control pill had the biggest impact on women from the United States, changing their sexual mores and fertility patterns, so too is the audience for both the film and the technologies it describes largely from the global North.¹ The very logic that “globalization is making it affordable” therefore references both contemporary systems of exploitation (as suggested by the fact that elites in the global South also access this technology) and longer histories of colonialism and imperialism.

These equivalences and elisions resonate throughout *Google Baby*, which describes how Israeli businessman Doron Mamet (inspired by his own very expensive experience with surrogacy in the United States) develops a service using donor eggs from the United States and gestational surrogates in India to lower the cost of “making babies” for couples who are otherwise unable to become biological parents. Based on the logic that “outsourcing to India is very trendy right now,” his business model depends upon using relatively inexpensive Indian surrogates to drive down the cost of “baby production.”² Mamet presents his mission in altruistic terms, explaining in an informational video to prospective clients, “I wanted to be a parent my whole life. . . . There is no reason because of what someone might think that I am not worthy of being a parent. . . . So I went and became a parent. And I would be happy to help others to become parents.”³ Referencing the fact that as a gay man some might deem him “not worthy of being a parent,” Mamet leverages his sexuality to paint surrogacy as an unquestionable good (one imagines his audience bristling at the notion that Mamet is “not worthy of being a parent” based on his sexual orientation). By emphasizing his sexual identity as the site of the denial of equality and rights, and forwarding surrogacy as the way to restore those rights, he papers over the exploitative aspects of transnational surrogacy, thus obscuring his business model’s dependence on the backs (or in this case wombs) of Indian women.⁴ After all, Mamet was able to become a parent not only in spite of what people “might think” but also because of what he was able to pay. Relying on a model of homonormativity that, as Jasbir Puar reminds us in *Terrorist Assemblages*, “can be read as a formation complicit with and invited into the biopolitical valorization of life in its inhabitation and reproduction of heteronormative norms,” Mamet reinforces an international division of labor that uses the undervaluation of Indian reproductive labor to produce and support life for national and transnational elites.⁵

Brand Frank, an Israeli documentarian, came upon the subject of *Google Baby* while studying as a Neimann Journalism Fellow at Harvard University. Struck by the number of ads on university bulletin boards calling for “young, good looking, and highly educated women” to become egg donors, Frank set out to explore how “babies had become a commodity” and how “globalization had a profound impact on the growing business of baby production.”⁶ This investigation of “how pregnancy could be disassembled into its elements only to be put

together again through an online mix-and-match” led Brand Frank to the phenomenon of Indian surrogacy.⁷ Initially suspecting that she would tell a story of “exploitation” (“the outsourcing of surrogacy to India, for a fraction of the price of western surrogates”), Brand Frank eventually comes to read transnational surrogacy in terms of a “feminist agenda.”⁸ That is, although she does not uncritically celebrate the globalization of baby production (the documentary does not flinch away from some of its less savory sides), she comes to see surrogacy as a form of empowerment for the Indian women who undertake it. Taking her cue from Dr. Nayna Patel, who runs the clinic featured in the documentary, Brand Frank explains, “Dr. Patel believes that for these rural women in India, surrogacy is almost the only way to make a life changing move. They are transforming their lives and the lives of their families and children by making education and/or housing a viable option.”⁹ Rather than investigating why gestational surrogacy is “almost the only way to make a life changing move,” both Dr. Patel and Brand Frank represent it as freeing the labor potential of otherwise unused wombs.¹⁰ Returning to the equivalences with which I began, just as the birth control pill freed women from the risks of unintended pregnancies, here freedom is understood as unlocking surrogates’ economic potential and thus “transforming their lives.”¹¹ In this equation, surrogacy becomes a feminist act of empowerment. The real villains in the documentary are the surrogates’ husbands, who do not seem to appreciate their wives’ labors on behalf of their families. As a review of the documentary in the *New York Times* puts it, in the end *Google Baby* shows us that “far worse than an extreme capitalist is a bad husband.”¹²

I turn to the issue of transnational surrogacy and the outsourcing of reproductive labor to India to think through contemporary imbrications of eugenics, feminism, and development in the era of globalization. Looking at how “the production of immediate life through affect and biology on one side of the world can serve to support life elsewhere,”¹³ as Kalindi Vora describes the outsourcing of biological and affective labor to India in a recent article, I argue that eugenic feminism in its latest guise is less about feminist nation building than it is about the liberal feminist subjectivity of the marketplace. As characterized by the introduction to a 2007 special issue of *New Formations*, the “new” eugenics are new precisely because, unlike the forms of eugenics I’ve examined throughout this book, they are delinked from the state and “characterized above all by individualism and consumer choice.”¹⁴ To

some observers, this “‘liberal eugenics’ rehabilitates a discredited concept by sweeping away the spectre of coercion and installing instead the idea of individuals who freely choose to use technological innovation in order to improve the life-chances of themselves and their children.”¹⁵ Of course, as many essays in the special issue point out, even if eugenics is not a state-sponsored project it nonetheless involves the coercions of the market.

The new eugenics thus smooths over the inequalities structurally necessary to globalization and posit a “brave new world” in which those who have access to expensive genetic and reproductive technologies can “improve the life-chances of themselves and their children,” and those who do not have such access cannot. This “privileging of the genes of the privileged,” as Elizabeth Watkins calls it, is a new form of positive eugenics in which the reproduction of the economically “well-born” is not only given a distinct advantage, but also (as *Google Baby* graphically illustrates) often depends upon the economic necessity of those more fertile but less economically well-born.¹⁶ At the same time, the co-option of transnational surrogacy to a “feminist agenda” of economic empowerment relies upon a liberal feminism that posits as its endpoint the modern, developed, reproductive subject who can freely make choices in her own best interests. What is ignored in this narrative is how, as Pheng Cheah argues in relation to the Platform for Action formulated at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the “desires and interests” of such a subject are conveniently made to coincide with the interests of global capitalism, as the “global biopolitical field . . . fabricates the interests and needs of the individuals exploited by global capitalism, integrating them by weaving them into the very fabric of the system.”¹⁷ In this sense Dr. Patel’s view of surrogacy as a form of empowerment resembles much-vaunted microcredit programs, which solve the problem of women’s poverty by enabling women’s entrance into largely unregulated and exploitative informal sector work.

Using the language of empowerment thereby obscures the issue of economic coercion (why, again, is gestational surrogacy “almost the only way to make a life changing move” for the rural Indian women who undertake it?) and ignores the hazards involved in this kind of work. Although the opening quotation implies by analogy that the “risks” of sexual reproduction have been removed from the act of “making babies,” very real risks nonetheless accrue to the women who undertake

this kind of labor, as the recent deaths of Indian surrogate, Premila Vaghela, and underage Indian egg donor, Sushma Pandey, attest.¹⁸ In an intake interview with a potential surrogate, Dr. Patel explains, “There is also death in delivery and pregnancy. For that, neither [the clients are] responsible nor the clinic is responsible.” The dissonance between the disavowal of responsibility through the language of contract and what is being disavowed (that is, death) reveals that what is being produced is not simply value, but what Vora calls “vital energy.” In theorizing this labor in terms of “vital energy” instead of “value,” Vora both references “the true content of value carried by the commodity and the absolute use value of labor power to capitalist production” and asserts “that what is produced by these activities exceeds what is recognizable in the commodity’s exchange value.” That is, she goes on to argue, tracking the production of vital energy in India for the global North lays bare “the connection between the exhaustion of biological bodies and labors in India to extend ‘life’ in the First World and a longer history of power relations underpinning what may seem like an emerging form of biopower in sites like commercial surrogacy.”¹⁹ The fact that vital energy exceeds its exchange value is a point to which I return shortly.

The longer histories of exploitation embedded within transnational surrogacy are covered over by the benevolent frame of “women helping women,” a phrase that evokes the problematic universalism of “global sisterhood.”²⁰ As Dr. Patel explains the transaction to a prospective surrogate: “She cannot have a child which she longs for, which you are going to give, and you cannot have a house. You cannot educate your son beyond school. For that, they are going to pay.”²¹ Interestingly, because the documentary chooses to focus solely on the “industry” side of “baby making,” it does not present the perspective of any clients, simply giving us the abstraction of “women helping women.”²² Instead of focusing on the client–surrogate relation, the documentary draws a link between U.S. egg donor Katherine (Kat) Gaylean and Indian surrogate Vaishaili (her last name isn’t given). This iteration of “sisterhood” serves as an oblique reminder that though Vaishaili’s reproductive labor is indispensable, her genetic material is pointedly unwanted.²³ While Kat is the only egg donor the documentary follows, it introduces us to multiple surrogates (in one scene they are introduced by the nationality of the contracting parents), the most individuated of which is Vaishaili.²⁴ The documentary creates a series of equivalences between Kat and

Vaishaili: they are both married and have children; they are both doing this reproductive work to resolve housing concerns. While Kat is going to use the money to continue renovations on a large house (one scene shows her moving a large-screen TV), Vaishaili uses her money to purchase a much smaller new house. The end of the documentary juxtaposes family scenes of the women. The first shows Kat, her husband, and two daughters shooting guns in the backyard and detailing the amount of money they've spent on guns. The second shows Vaishaili's new house and features a monologue by her husband telling her friend (failed surrogate Diksha) that "women's brains are not very powerful. They are not very bright. But their brains do work on some occasions." In general the film doesn't moralize, but it is hard not to read these two scenes as critically commenting on these women's lives and underscoring how different they are from the presumed (non-gun-toting and feminist-leaning) viewer.

Thus despite the many surface differences between these two women, I suggest that the documentary is asking us to focus on the ways in which they occupy similar subject positions in their respective locations. After all, Brand Frank mentions in an interview that most of the egg donors are single—why, then, does she choose to focus on this particular married donor, and why does she underscore the connections between the two women?²⁵ One reason, I propose, is to flatten out the differences between them (in a sense that recalls Thomas Friedman's "The world is flat" thesis) by focusing on the intimacies that globalization creates.²⁶ Evoking this flatness, moreover, has the attendant purpose of interpellating Vaishaili into the kind of consumerism Kat represents. As Anne Kerr argues, "What this film shows us is that wealthy consumers and entrepreneurs are creating the conditions for poor and vulnerable women to turn their reproductive potential into tradable commodities so that they too might join the consumer classes."²⁷ By focusing only on the industry side, furthermore, the relationship between the client and the surrogate is obscured, thus concealing the dialectic of positive and negative eugenics that I trace throughout this book in which what appears to be a form of freedom is, when followed through to its global, postcolonial logic, revealed to be coercive. That is, the reproductive technology that grants rights (as in Doron's) and fulfills dreams (as in "women helping women") is linked to a staggeringly different toll on the surrogates' bodies and lives. In this sense, the connection between birth control practices associated with liberal feminist rights in

the global North and the less emancipatory narrative of population control in the postcolonial world is repeated here, although the price of coercion is roughly inverse: the sterilized woman and the surrogate confront one another.

The language of altruism implied by “women helping women,” in which the surrogate and client are equally implicated, extends to Dr. Patel, who sees herself as helping the women who serve as surrogates in her clinic. That she insists that any houses bought with payment for surrogacy be placed in the surrogate’s (not the husband’s) name attests to Dr. Patel’s own perceived feminist agenda, as does the fact that she has established a trust fund to help her surrogates. My point is not to malign such good intentions as purely cynical or “false,” but rather to underscore the impoverishment not only of what globalization has wrought but also of a feminist imagination in which gestational surrogacy is “almost the only way” to “transform lives.” The fact remains, furthermore, that the transformation pictured in the film is not necessarily that of the surrogate, but of her family and most particularly her child. In the case of the Vaishaili, surrogacy does indeed allow her to buy a house, and the deed is put in her name. Nonetheless, Vaishaili’s husband says he will need to “send her for surrogacy again” in order to support their son’s education; the father has aspirations of training his son to become an army officer (or at least a police officer—the requirement is that he have a position that will ensure him a job at a desk, not “standing at the border with a gun in his hand”).²⁸ Thus just like the peasant mothers I survey in chapter 4, the reproductive (here translated into productive, paid) labor Vaishaili performs is explicitly done for the masculine subject of the nation. Even though this reproductive labor is not performed directly for the nation, it aids the reproduction of the masculine national subject within a globalized economy as well as serving a global regime of positive eugenics.

Thinking of the Indian gestational surrogate as the new Mother India thereby continues one of the stories *Eugenic Feminism* has attempted to tell: that of the transformation of the symbol “Mother India” within the United States and India over the course of the twentieth century. For Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mother India represents the sexuo-economic relationship taken to its inevitable conclusion: the overly sex-differentiated, fecund, and tradition-bound oppressed woman who serves as an object lesson for white U.S. feminist advance. Sarojini Naidu, in contrast, innovates on the male nationalist rendering of Mother India

by imagining her as the progenitor, even if slumbering, of an Indian feminist modernity that precedes that of the West. In response both to Naidu's vision and to U.S. flirtations with Hindu spirituality, Katherine Mayo takes up the issue of child marriage to rewrite Mother India as a perverse symbol of stillborn Indian nationalism from which U.S. nationhood (and white womanhood) must be hysterically guarded. The post-independence Indian nationalist reclamation of Mother India departs from all of these visions by conceiving of Mother India as the heroic peasant mother, continuous with the land in her ability to bear and standing in for the authority of the postcolonial state over the revolutionary actor, an authority made timeless by its connection to her symbolically powerful figuration. This figuration shifts yet again during the Emergency, when Indira Gandhi attempts to speak both for and as the subaltern Mother India: "Indira is India, India is Indira." What this sleight of hand elides, however, is that the subaltern subjects of the nation bear the brunt of her repressive policies.

Within the context of twenty-first-century transnational surrogacy, Mother India becomes the racially evacuated womb giving life not to the nation but to the forces of transnational capital. Thus while resonant with the different iterations of eugenic feminism I trace throughout this book, the imbrications of eugenics, feminism, and development apparent in transnational surrogacy are distinctly different. Here the state is most notable for its (neoliberal) absence; the absence of any real regulation of gestational surrogacy allows it to thrive and helps to bolster India as a growing site of biomedical tourism.²⁹ The development of the transnational surrogacy industry in India thus depends upon the globalization of the Indian economy, a process that arguably has its roots in Indira Gandhi's regime. While the liberalization of the Indian economy officially begins in 1991, after a balance of payment crisis and bailout by the International Monetary Fund (IMF),³⁰ the seeds were planted by Indira Gandhi's nationalization of the banks in 1969. This popular move seemed resonant with socialist politics, but in reality, as Vijay Prashad argues, it "was designed to accomplish two things: to centralize finance capital in the interests of the big bourgeoisie and to offer credit to 'small and middle entrepreneurs' and to the agrarian bourgeoisie who were both unable to generate capital since the economic stagnation in the mid-1960s."³¹ Likewise, Indira Gandhi's Twenty-Point Programme during the Emergency was, as Francine Frankel details, billed as a "direct assault on poverty"³²

but did not offer any real redistributive measures. Not only did the Twenty-Point Programme mirror demands issued to India by the World Bank, it also (in Point 14: “liberalization of investment procedures”) opened up the economy to foreign investment.³³ As Prashad asserts, despite Gandhi’s rhetoric of *Giribi hatao* (“Abolish poverty”) in her 1971 campaign,

the scraps to landless peasants would come to mean nothing in time as the state essentially handed over the keys to the kingdom to the industrial elite and foreign capital. When the Emergency ended in 1977 and much of its program withered, the drive to liberalize the economy, draw in foreign capital, and welcome a relationship with the IMF remained.³⁴

I end *Eugenic Feminism* with a reading of *Google Baby* for what it does (and does not) tell us about the changing fate of Indian women’s reproductive labor with the globalization of the Indian economy. At first glance, this rendering of transnational surrogacy would seem to be a revaluation of the pathological fecundity of the subaltern Indian woman (as traced through some of the works and moments I survey throughout *Eugenic Feminism*), turning it from a problem into a solution. One of the ways this transformation works is through the equivalences the film invites us to draw—between the 1960s invention of the birth control pill and new reproductive technologies; between the rights of childless people to have children and of impoverished women to have the basics of shelter and education for themselves and their families; and between the U.S. egg donor and the Indian surrogate. The documentary creates these equivalences by also throwing up differences, as the incommensurability of these different subject positions is both acknowledged and discounted in the name of progress. But this mapping of equivalences ignores the vital energy that exceeds exchange value, and focusing on this excess opens up a reading not of what is produced (or reproduced) but what is lost, what is foreclosed, in precisely the equivalences the documentary seeks to make.

In closing, I propose a different reading practice that draws on what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak develops as “radical alterity”: “an imaging that is the figuration of the ethical as the impossible.”³⁵ Instead of trying to acquire knowledge of the other, or trying to make the other more like the self (with the attendant sense, as Spivak puts it, “I am necessarily better, I am necessarily indispensable, I am necessarily the one to right wrongs, I am necessarily the end-product for which history

happened”), radical alterity is the recognition of incommensurability.³⁶ To realize the impossibility of reaching the “quite-other” is ethical in that it does not assume that the quite-other must be made over into the self. Crucially, Spivak introduces the discussion of radical alterity within the context of global feminism and gender and development, in which the supposedly ethical agenda of “righting wrongs” equals making over underdeveloped women of the global South in order for them to be appropriated by global capital (as, for instance, in the case of microcredit, which manufactures poor women’s desires and then calls them interests).

Against such models that would seek to dissolve the other in the self, I suggest that the ethics of radical alterity open a possibility for modeling a non-eugenic, because nonreproductive, feminist reading practice; one that resists what the narrative itself is trying to reproduce by focusing on what it jettisons, what it labels dysgenic and thus unworthy of reproduction. In this sense a non-eugenic reading practice rejects what Lee Edelman terms “reproductive futurism”: the notion that political discourse is structured around the future inhering in the figure of the (idealized) Child.³⁷ In resisting this reproductive drive, I use Spivak’s notion of radical alterity to question the need for equivalences and the erasure of difference I see operating in eugenic narratives. A non-eugenic reading practice thus proceeds on three counts. The first is discursive, unpacking the purifying impulse contained in watchwords such as “empowerment,” “progress,” “utopia,” and “development,” to name just a few. The second is material, tracing the effects of how such rhetoric is enacted upon bodies as people and populations are sorted into the categories of fit and unfit. Finally, the last is economic, uncovering the workings of eugenics through the very logics of imperialism, development, and globalization.

Throughout *Eugenic Feminism* I’ve attempted to model this non-eugenic reading practice by focusing on precisely what eugenics would seek to excise even in (or perhaps, more accurately, *especially* in) its most utopian guises. In doing so I’ve suggested that the very demand for political purity as the way toward a brighter future is in itself wrapped up in eugenics, and that a truly transnational and postcolonial feminist reading practice must think through the positive/negative dialectic modeled by eugenics to show how important political values are potentially co-optable in the very name of progress. Nonetheless, by tracing the iterations of eugenics, feminism, imperialism, and devel-

opment through the United States and India over the better part of a century, my aim has been to resist the seductions of the purifying logic of eugenics even when it is articulated in the name of a more emancipatory future, and to chart a new way forward—albeit messy and imperfect—on a different historical map.

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