Title
#surrogacy: Examining transnational surrogacy as a colonial network in India and on Twitter

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8hm7w0xq

Author
McColl, Stephanie

Publication Date
2014-04-01
Examining transnational surrogacy as a colonial network in India and on Twitter

ABSTRACT

Focusing specifically on contemporary discourses of transnational commercial surrogacy present on Twitter, my aim is to unpack the complex dynamics that exist between contemporary assisted reproductive practices and technology. Specifically, I seek to expose Indian women’s bodies as ever tied to colonial processes seen through transnational surrogacy transactions. Through the use of Twitter I will demonstrate and challenge how Indian surrogate bodies have largely been reduced to their colonial nature in this particular social media space. This will necessarily provide a material dimension that limits the seeming ‘boundlessness’ of Twitter by exposing and tying it to ongoing colonial narratives.

In examining discourses of transnational surrogacy found on Twitter I will map colonial narratives as they imprint themselves on Indian women’s bodies, thus allowing for an examination of these bodies as intimately intertwined in the projects of modernity and colonialism. From here, I will also demonstrate how the materiality and histories of Indian women’s bodies can be understood on a continuum, both temporally and geographically, which more aptly represent modernity and colonialism as dynamic processes. I do not seek to conflate or collapse colonial experiences and bodies into a straightforward narrative; rather, this discussion, focusing on attempts to expose the complexities and intricacies in illustrating how colonial processes are by no means ‘finished’ and how they exemplify that to be a

Stephanie McColl
MA Candidate, Queen’s University

UCLA Thinking Gender Conference 2014
February 7th, 2014

Panel: Conceiving Reproduction: Motherhood, Surrogacy, and Contraception
The contemporary space occupied by women’s reproductive bodies is one fraught with unsettling dynamics. As technology has come to mediate many aspects of daily life, so too has it become a defining feature of modernity, as can be seen through Western reproductive practices. A wealth of feminist literature in the area of reproductive politics has focused on the intersections between female reproduction and technology, which, at times, has been framed in a liberal discourse of ‘choice’. This discourse lends itself to obscuring the racial and colonial histories that implicate particular women’s bodies as tools for the development and deployment of reproductive technologies, namely surrogacy. What remains to be explored are the ways in which contemporary assisted reproductive practices and technologies are structured by on-going colonial power relations and by colonial narratives of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Focusing specifically on contemporary discourses of transnational surrogacy present on Twitter, I examine networks of coloniality that currently frame both transnational surrogacy transactions in India and related posts on Twitter. Here, I seek to expose Indian women’s bodies as persistently tied to colonial processes seen through these transactions. Through the use of Twitter I will also demonstrate how colonial narratives continue to reveal themselves, even if in only one hundred and forty characters (see Appendix 1).

Twitter will be used to demonstrate and challenge how Indian surrogate bodies have largely been reduced to a colonial trope in this particular social media space. Accordingly, Twitter becomes a contemporary archive from which to expose the ongoing colonial histories and narratives around transnational surrogacy in India. In what remains I will explore Twitter as a colonial archive, not only as a source to consider the current ‘conversations’ around surrogacy in India, but also examining Twitter in what Anne Stoler (2002) calls the “archive-as subject.” Thus, Twitter becomes more than a database from which to extract information around
transnational surrogacy, but in its form exposes the coloniality that undercuts Twitter as a social media site and transnational surrogacy as a multi-billion dollar industry in India.

Gestational surrogacy is the process whereby a surrogate is implanted with a previously fertilized embryo to carry to term for commissioning parents. Engaging with the intersectional dynamics present it becomes imperative to recognize that the surrogate only becomes visible when it suits the interests of the intended parents and is mediated through surrogacy agencies (see Appendix 2). Existing in a realm of temporary pseudo-motherhood, the impregnated surrogate must comply with the intended parents’ requests. This includes medical examinations, dietary and rest requirements, possible environmental changes, and so forth. In this way, the surrogate, while carrying out a reproductive ‘assignment’, becomes disembodied from this experience (see Appendix 3). In regards to the maternal functions, the surrogate is expected to care for the foetus as if it were her own, while also being capable of relinquishing the child after birth. The reproductive and maternal expectations serve to recast the surrogate body as a ‘storage unit’, which is reflected in tweets discussing “wombs for rent on the rise” (FOX 4 News 2013; see Appendix 4). Through these processes the surrogate is reduced to a series of viable and productive body parts, and thus is rendered invisible in her personhood.

Surrogacy cannot be removed from the conditions of modernity. Drawing from the critical works of Dorothy Roberts (1997; 2011) and Laura Harrison (2010) on racialized bodies and reproductive ‘interventions’ and control, it becomes crucial to recognize it is typically poor, racialized women who are targeted globally, by the ‘virtue’ of their allegedly ‘uncontrolled’ reproductive capacity, as the ‘ideal’ candidates for surrogate ‘motherhood’. We see a containment of poor, racialized women, who, while they are constructed as ‘irresponsible breeders’ when they procreate, are seen as accessible bodies to incorporate into networks of
surrogacy (Chun 2012). The racism that is deployed within the practice of cross-racial gestational surrogacy is insidious in part because it does not exile the racial ‘Other’ from the economy of reproductive labour, but rather situates non-white surrogates in a location that benefits the white consumer.

Twitter, as a colonial space, thus serves to contain Indian surrogates (See Appendix 5). While there are tweets that address transnational surrogacy in India, they offer examination of surrogacy as an industry, with the surrogates as ‘exploited’ features of this ‘unregulated’ enterprise (see Appendix 6). Even with these tweets that attempt to expose the exploitative and problematic dynamics of transnational surrogacy in India, the lived experiences of Indian surrogates remain invisible. Any mention of Indian surrogates as exploited or “underpaid and uncared for” (dna 2013, see Appendix 7) on Twitter comes to reflect Spivak’s (1993) warning that the subaltern does not or cannot speak through narrative structures that predict her silence or need her to be saved. With Twitter often framed as a seemingly boundless space for ‘information’ to circulate, here too it becomes apparent that, working from Derrida, “the question of the politics [and coloniality] of the archive is our permanent orientation” (Derrida 1995, quoted in Arondekar 2009: 2). It becomes clear, then, that the absence of Indian women narrating their surrogacy experiences on Twitter is intimately tied to ongoing colonial histories, where Indian women have seldom been the focus of colonial archives. And yet, this does not mean that they are entirely absent. As Arondekar (2009: 4) explains, “[to] read [the archive] without a trace, following Spivak, is not a mandate against archival work, but rather a call to interrogate, without paralysis, to challenge, without ending the promise of the future.” Thus, even in the ‘glowing’ reports on Twitter of white Western surrogates, who have given the ‘gift of life’ (see Appendix 8), Indian surrogates can still be seen to mark Twitter as a colonial space. Here, Indian women’s
reproductive bodies haunt colonial networks online, despite the fact that their ‘voices’ are not always present in tweets pertaining to their embodied experiences as colonial subjects of transnational surrogacy.

Notably, however, there do exist ‘interruptions’ to colonial narratives on Twitter (see Appendix 9). This can be seen in the 2012 study done by the New Delhi-based NGO, SAMA, on surrogacy in India. While not overwhelmingly or even directly referred to on Twitter, it was in “reading [the archive] without a [significant] trace” that this study found its way into my research. This study is one of few to provide both quantitative and qualitative data on the surrogacy industry and surrogacy hostels in India, as well as accounts from doctors of surrogacy agencies and Indian surrogates themselves. While not the main focus of this discussion, the study, *Birthing a Market: A Study on Commercial Surrogacy*, provides data on issues of race, caste and religion that are often overlooked, or underdeveloped in Western academic research on surrogacy. Specifically, Indian women who make successful applications to be surrogates are predominantly Hindu, of lighter complexion, and are not from a low caste (Sama 2012: 39-40). One doctor from Punjab made clear that these ‘qualities’ are not irrelevant to surrogacy arrangements, stating that “There was a surrogate who belonged to a low caste and she was rejected on that basis. [The commissioning parents said] We don’t want a low-caste surrogate, or someone with a dark complexion or someone who is not good to look at” (Sama 2012: 39). These identity markers were often justified on the basis of the ‘health’ of the surrogate, with another doctor from Punjab commenting, “Even if it is not her genetic material, patients may demand [it]. They think of the blood and [the] environmental factors that may affect [the child]” (Sama 2012: 40). Thus, connections to fertility and ‘fitness’ as a surrogate are being linked to religion, caste, and complexion. These points are relevant in establishing the material realities
that serve to perpetuate the politics of exclusion, which date back to colonial India, where
European privilege and power was contingent on and safeguarded through the construction of
social categories. These categories served to demarcate legal and social classifications defining,
as Stoler (1997:45) makes clear, “who was ‘white’ and who was ‘native’, who could become a
citizen rather than a subject, which children were legitimate progeny and which were not.”

For Indian women, entangled in networks of transnational surrogacy, the caste system
plays a key role in their sexual domestication insofar as women of ‘higher’ caste status were not
historically required to work and thus were tied to the notion of ‘housewife’ (Lee 2010). This is
significant, not only in relation to colonial histories and the construction of the ‘Indian woman’
as a symbol of nationhood, but also, as Wendy Lee (2010: 65) informs, “[g]iven the mutually
reinforcing effects of sex and caste in the production of ‘women in the house’, it is not surprising
that among the first to offer comparatively inexpensive ‘one-stop’ surrogacy would be agencies
operating in India—and that among the first to take advantage of these would be couples from
wealthy Western nations.” Here, the Indian transnational surrogacy agencies, through their
‘surrogacy hostels’, reproduce the image of the upper caste ‘housewife’ for potential Indian
surrogates to aspire to. As a surrogate, housed in a ‘surrogacy hostel’ and being looked after by a
staff of doctors, maids, and cooks, the construction of the ‘happy housewife’ permeates the space
and conceals the exploitative realities that encompass surrogacy experiences. This image of the
‘happy Indian housewife’ as surrogate can also be seen on Twitter (see Appendix 10). The point
here is that surrogacy appears attractive based on a cultural image that sees the upper castes and
classes, for women, associated with the notion of the ‘housewife’. And yet, in seeking out the
‘interruptions’ to these colonial tropes and recognizing the heterogeneity and multiplicity of
Indian surrogate women’s experiences we may attempt ‘break through’ what Spivak (1993: 613)
calls the “skeletal and ignorant account(s)” that we see currently present on Twitter (see Appendix 11).

The lived realities of surrogacy in India, as well as the colonial narratives present on Twitter both serve to demonstrate how racialized women become associated with and used for their productive and reproductive capacities. Viewing Twitter as intertwined with colonial networks of contemporary transnational surrogacy allows for an understanding of the deployment of technologies of race in controlling the information, conversations and silences, as well as the movements and activities of the contracted surrogates, all for the alleged benefit of white consumers. The material conditions that encourage women in India, as well as those elsewhere around the globe, to seek surrogacy suggests that it is framed as an attractive form of employment that also further ties these women’s bodies to modes of control and surveillance. Through transnational surrogacy networks, the raced body of the surrogate ultimately becomes read as a text that marks her liminality, both socially and legally.

My investigation of how Indian women’s bodies are continually wrapped up in colonial experiences aims to inspire different narratives that recognize the complexities and multiplicities of modernity and colonialism, in working against what Paul Gilroy calls “the closure of categories” and towards “inescapable hybridity and intermixture” (Gilroy 1993, quoted in Eisenstein 2004: 46). Here, discourses of transnational surrogacy on Twitter and the material realities in India become evidence of the assemblages of modernity, as particular bodies, in this case, Indian women’s bodies, come to be tied to the technologies of race in the most ‘intimate’ of ways, and in so doing, reflect the notion that to be a ‘modern’ subject is to be a colonial subject.

In the twenty-first century, gestational surrogacy has become an issue of much feminist debate. However, more limited discussions address the colonial intersections that have come to
frame, in particular, transnational surrogacy. In seeking to consider the ways in which reproductive technologies continue to be used and refined for colonial aims my endeavor is to demonstrate how the on-going histories of those read as ‘post-colonial’ subjects exist as connected pathways that cross linear notions of time and space. Furthermore, in bringing together a variety of texts, these too, become part of the conditions that constitute all of us as ‘post-colonial’ subjects within modernity (Sharpe 2010). Utilizing Twitter, then, becomes both a signifier for the trans-locational geographies of colonialism and the enduring violence. In a similar vein, Indian women’s bodies, as transnational surrogates, quite literally are impregnated with the (primarily white) children of colonialism. These technologies of race are mapped onto the surrogate body in ways that expose the colonial networks that make up twenty-first century transnational surrogacy.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Making Surrogacy affordable for white consumers

Appendix 2: ‘The ‘Baby Chase’ and the ‘American family’
mypregnancytime.com @MyPregNancyTime
#pregnancy #pregnant Top 10 Myths About Surrogacy - Discover the Top 10 Myths about Surrogacy. What is it really l... ow.ly/2D6S5M

Expand

Reply  Retweet  Favorited  More

Women's Health @WomensHealthMag
"I gave birth to someone else's children." One woman’s story of becoming a surrogate: ow.ly/sH7qL

Expand

Reply  Retweet  Favorited  More

NYT Styles @NYTStyles
Motherlode Blog: Motherlode Must-Read: ‘The Baby Chase: How Surrogacy Is Transforming the American Family’ nyti.ms/1dOcyy7

View summary

Reply  Retweet  Favorited  More
Appendix 3: Consumer “hardships”: India as a “haven” for US commissioning parents

Leia Picard @CFCLelia
My Surrogacy experience, from Intended to Mom fertilityconsultants.ca/blog/surrogacy...

SurrogacyUK @surrogacyUK
Surrogacy Costs | How Much Does #Surrogacy Cost? bit.ly/19Py0Ch via @surrogacyUK

Stephanie Caballero @surrogacylawyer
The US is a "nightmare" compared to India? Varying laws can complicate surrogacy - SFGate sfgate.com/health/article... via @SFGate

Stephanie M. Lee @stephanleemlee
Motherhood gets tricky when surrogacy laws differ everywhere: sfchronicle.com/health/article...
Appendix 4: “Wombs for rent on the rise” (FOX 4 News 2013).

Appendix 5: Monetising surrogacy?

Appendix 6: Producing babies to order?
Appendix 7: Transnational surrogacy as commodified ‘motherhood’?
Appendix 8: Altruistic surrogacy narratives

Appendix 9: SAMA Study: Birthing A Market

Appendix 10: The ‘happy’ surrogate
BioNews @BioNewsUK
Oct 3
Happy stories about #surrogacy in @DailyMailUK ow.ly/ps2KA good to see positive news of surrogacy in UK after #Houseofsurrogates

Arts Infinite @ArtsInfinite
6 Dec 2011
Inside India’s surrogacy industry: Poverty makes Indian women happy to bear children for infertile western coupl... bit.ly/rvL1gp

Jocelle Arthur @JocelleSkinProd
16 Sep 2011
#FITNESS: Best Surrogacy Agencies in Mumbai - People from all over the world are opting India as the prime destinati... ow.ly/1eltYH
Appendix 11: “Skeletal and ignorant accounts” (Spivak 1993: 613)

Bibliography


CNN Health @cnnhealth. 2013. Surrogate Crystal Kelley was offered $10K to have an abortion. She refused. Here is her amazing story. http://cnn.it/19x3D8F
CNN International @cnni. 2013. Surrogacy in India is booming but critics say it exploits poor women. cnn.it/1fdvZU8. [Twitter post, 3 November 2013]. Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/cnni/status/397184201822187520.


dna @dna. 2013. As India emerges as a hub for surrogacy, surrogate mothers are underpaid and uncared for. dna.in/ByAN. [Twitter post, 17 July 2013]. Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/dna/status/357470094382727169.


Jocelle Arthur @JocelleSkinProd. 2011. #FITNESS: Best Surrogacy Agencies in Mumbai – People from all over the world are opting India as the prime destinati… ow.ly/1eItYH. [Twitter post, 16 September 2011]. Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/JocelleSkinProd/status/114601388532703232.

Kimberly Castro @kimacastro. 2013. Surrogacy can cost at least $60,000. Here’s how to afford the hefty price tag: t.usnews.com/bF1A5 via @USNewsMoney. [Twitter post, 22 October 2013]. Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/kimacastro/status/392811807909244930.


The Stream @AJStream. ICYMI | Monetising motherhood: Comercial surrogacy is on the rise around the world - stream.aljazeera.com/story/201308150016-0022980. [Twitter post, 7 October 2013]. Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/AJStream/status/387357991928098816.


