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# Gay Fathers, Surrogate Mothers, and the Question of the Human

A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis of Emotions in *Barn till varje pris?*

The social inequalities of our time are largely a legacy of this definition of "the human" and subsequent discourse that have placed particular subjects, practices, and geographies at a distance from "the human."  
Lisa Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents"

**THE QUESTION OF** surrogacy has made a remarkable journey in Swedish public and political opinion, from being considered a relatively peripheral reproductive method without support to becoming a major family policy issue. An investigation commissioned by the Swedish government is currently examining the possibility of altruistic surrogacy in Sweden. The final report is due in June 2015. In the meantime, Statens medicinsk-etiska råd [the Swedish National Council on Medical Ethics] (Smer), advisory to the government, presented a new report on assisted reproduction in 2013, recommending a legalization of altruistic surrogacy, that is surrogacy arrangements without compensation beyond medical and other reasonable expenses (Smer rapport 2013:01).

The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights (RFSL) has been a driving force for putting surrogacy on the political agenda. In 2008, the organization decided to work for the legalization of surrogacy. That same year, there was a significant increase

in the number of articles on surrogacy in Swedish media.<sup>1</sup> In an early opinion piece published in the national evening paper *Expressen*, the President and Vice President of the RFSL argue in favor of surrogacy, and discerned "a biologicistic, heteronormative and couple oriented view of parenthood and family" as the main obstacles to this goal (Juvás and Westerlund 2008). The understanding of surrogacy as a norm breaking form of family formation, that challenges hegemonic notions of family and kinship, has had significant impact on the way that surrogacy is conceived in Sweden. While the majority of the Swedish intended parents are heterosexual couples – approximately fifty children per year are born through surrogacy arrangements abroad – contract pregnancy is often framed as a question concerning LGBTQ reproductive rights, and more specifically, male same-sex parenting.

In 2010, the discussion on surrogacy was intensified in the aftermath of the publication of feminist journalist and activist Kajsa Ekis Ekman's debate book *Varan och varat* [*Being and Being Bought*] in which she argued against surrogacy by suggesting an analogy between surrogacy and prostitution. Another landmark through which surrogacy has maintained its topicality in Swedish media debate is the documentary series *Barn till varje pris?* [*Children at any Cost?*] (SVT1 2011), featuring a white male same-sex couple turning to surrogacy services in India, broadcasted on public service television in September and October 2011.

This essay examines the representation of surrogacy in *Barn till varje pris?* It is the first and hitherto only popularly aimed TV-representation of surrogacy produced by Swedish public service television and screened primetime on one of its national channels. It won both high viewing rates and critical praise for offering a nuanced perspective on a complicated issue (Näslund 2011; Skogkär 2011). These circumstances enforce the potential that the series shares with other media reports on surrogacy to be more than representations of individual stories and contribute to the public and private opinions of surrogacy in general. In cases of unfamiliar subjects such as surrogacy, a media representation is likely to have an even greater share in shaping understanding and opinion.

## Aim and Objectives

In a previous article I have argued that a striking feature of the documentary is how the Swedish couple and the Indian surrogate mother are constructed as each other's opposites, where the former is associated with notions of the gift and giving, and the latter with rationality and economics (Gondouin 2012). In this article I wish to explore this further, by rephrasing the opposition in terms of an unequal distribution of affect, in particular love and vulnerability. The homosexual men in *Barn till varje pris?* are cast as emotionally, socially, and politically vulnerable identities, juxtaposed to the Indian surrogate mother, constructed as insistently nonemotional and nonvulnerable. The overarching question is: How is surrogacy represented in *Barn till varje pris?* How does the unequal distribution of emotions shape our understanding of surrogacy? More specifically, how does it negotiate the positionality of the different parties, and in particular how are the intersecting axes of both the privilege and the marginalization of the Swedish couple developed? What are the political and ethical consequences of the unequal distribution of affect that shape the images of Swedish men and Indian women? The analysis will draw on contemporary feminist engagements with the globalization of reproductive technologies, in particular discussions of how the notion of "human dignity" might respond to the ethical challenges of transnational surrogacy. Furthermore, the emphasis on emotions will be connected to questions of genre and form: How does the reality TV format contribute to the representational logic in *Barn till varje pris?*

I shall proceed by giving a brief survey of previous research on vulnerability in the context of surrogacy and reproductive travel. I will also explain my view of media and TV genres as culturally significant. A summary of the Swedish debate on surrogacy then follows, with particular regard to LGBTQ rights. After these introductory remarks, a reading of *Barn till varje pris?* is presented. I argue that the show establishes a defining binary that is then discussed from a transnational feminist perspective that highlights the ways in which reproductive technologies such as surrogacy are intimately tied to racialized notions

of gender. The article is concluded with a summary and a short reflection suggesting ways in which my findings may contribute to further conversations.

### **Vulnerability, Transnational Surrogacy, and the Intimization of Media Culture**

Vulnerability is a key concept in research on surrogacy and reproductive travel. However, it is the vulnerability of the women acting as surrogates that stands in focus. In feminist research, reproduction has been identified as a major cause for the oppression of women, and while some see technologies such as surrogacy as potentially liberating, others see it as a powerful tool for reinforcing the control and exploitation of women's reproductive capacities (Roberts 1996). In the case of transnational surrogacy, the limited financial options are added to this inherent vulnerability of all women (Bailey 2011).

However, vulnerability is a concept that may also be applied to the commissioning parents. Children are increasingly valued assets in the late capitalist societies of the Global North. Scholars such as David Eng (2010) have pointed out how, in a US context, parenthood has become not just a measure of value, self-worth, and completion, but also of national belonging and full citizenship. Indeed, as Judith Halberstam (2005) remarks, the very notion of normality and respectability depends on a logic of reproductive temporality – ruled by a biological clock for women – that installs middle class heterosexual marriage as the norm. In Sweden, the social pressure to reproduce is underpinned by a social system elaborated on pronatalist politics. Public childcare and extended parental leave, enabling women to combine motherhood and employment, has led to high fertility rates (Widding Isaksen 2011). The valuing of parenthood has contributed to the marginalization and devaluation of those who choose not to reproduce.<sup>2</sup>

Damien Riggs and Clemence Due (2013) conceptualize as *reproductive vulnerability* the specific exposure pertaining to nonconformity to the reproductive norm. This is understood as reproductive heterosexual intercourse, which may be either medical or social. A culture in which

citizenship is conditioned by the capacity to reproduce leaves involuntary childless couples sensitive to reproductive vulnerability, although it positions a heterosexual couple without children differently than a childless homosexual couple. Swedish male same-sex couples turning to Indian surrogacy – that is, white middle class male same-sex couples and underprivileged Indian women – is a particularly complex phenomenon involving incommensurable vulnerabilities and multidimensional power relations. *Barn till varje pris?* offers a rich site for reflecting on the intersectional dynamics of transnational surrogacy, an example in which the reproductive vulnerabilities of homosexual couples intersects with the gendered and racialized vulnerability of Indian women.

When engaging with the form and genre of *Barn till varje pris?* and how it interplays with the construction of surrogacy, I consider different forms of reality TV as privileged forms of the turn towards the intimate and private that characterize contemporary media culture (Jerslev 2004). Reality TV's favoring of individual subjective experience at the expense of more general truth claims (Dovey 2000; Renov 2004) is situated within a broader cultural process designated by terms such as confessional or therapy culture (White 2002; Koivunen 2008). The favoring of the intimate at the expense of the political and public domain has been criticized. In her critique of public life in post-Reagan United States, Lauren Berlant (1997), for instance, speaks of how an intimization of citizenship and the public sphere transforms issues formerly seen as ideological and political into questions of personal experience and moral. In my reading, I argue that a similar depolitization and privatization can be traced in how surrogacy is constructed in *Barn till varje pris?*

### **The Swedish Media Debate on Surrogacy and LGBTQ Rights**

The political debate on surrogacy is highly polarized. The RFSL, alongside six out of the eight political parties currently in parliament, voted for the ongoing government report.<sup>3</sup> Two parties, Vänsterpartiet (V) [the Left Party] and Kristdemokraterna (KD) [the Christian Democrats], are against all forms of surrogacy, along with Feministiskt initiativ (Fi) [Feminist Initiative], currently outside parliament, but since

May 2014 represented in the European parliament. Another important actor against surrogacy is Sveriges Kvinnolobby, the Swedish section of the European Women's Lobby (EWL), an independent umbrella organization for women's organizations in Sweden.

Those in favor of contract pregnancy in the Swedish debate on surrogacy usually argue in terms of a liberal discourse, with individual freedom and the right to decide over one's own body as fundamental values, often with a feminist twist, arguing that women should be allowed to decide over their own body and that "even women are capable of making a free choice" ("Surrogatmamman" 2011). Andreas Bengtsson, one of the fathers in *Barn till varje pris?*, is an active voice among those in favor of surrogacy and the founder of a website on surrogacy.

Another dominant pro-surrogacy argument is that of surrogacy as a progressive and norm breaking practice, enabling new family formations that challenge conventional structures and stereotypes, such as single, same-sex, and transsexual parents. Advocates arguing from a norm critical perspective often see themselves as modern and progressive, with an awareness of gender and motherhood as social constructs, as opposed to the alleged value-conservatism and essentialism of those who oppose surrogacy (Johansson and Holmström 2010).

Critics see surrogacy not as an expression of self-possession, but as an expression of loss of autonomy. Women's bodies are objectified, turned into a commodity, and where defenders point to the "queer" potential of surrogacy, opponents view it as a reproduction and reinforcement of gender stereotypes, as a continuation of the exploitation and devaluation of women's reproductive capacity (Ekman 2010). The current president of the RFSL, Ulrika Westerlund, agrees on the potential risks of surrogacy but highlights the decisive role of context. She argues that it is possible to regulate surrogacy in the Swedish context so that coercion and exploitation are avoided (Strandberg 2014). On the contrary, Ekman departs from a biologicistic view on femininity and motherhood and claims that surrogacy is inherently exploitative since it transforms women and children into things.<sup>4</sup>

The Swedish LGBTQ movement has been very successful in promot-

ing their interests during the last decades, and Sweden is considered to be one of the most progressive countries in the world in regard to LGBTQ rights. The law on registered partnership came into force in 1995, and the Swedish marriage legislation is gender-neutral since 2009. However, the most significant distinction between heterosexual and homosexual couples is made in regard to reproduction (Ryan-Flood 2005; Rydström 2005). The development of new reproductive technologies and the struggle for reproductive rights has attracted attention to a number of hierarchies in parenthood and reproduction, not only regarding sexuality but also gender, disability, and marital status (the couple norm), where couples are favored before singles. Since 2003, same-sex couples that have entered registered partnership have the right to apply for adoption. However, above all, this has in practice meant stepparent adoption. International adoption continues to be virtually impossible as sending countries are reluctant to place children in same-sex families, and domestic adoption is practically nonexistent in Sweden. For lesbian couples, access to assisted reproduction has been granted since 2005. Single women travel abroad for insemination, mostly to Denmark, but a revision of the law currently in process will give single women the right to insemination in Sweden from 2015. The increase in reproductive alternatives for lesbian women has reduced the number of so called "four clover arrangements" (a gay and a lesbian couple) (see, for instance, Wennerholm et al. 2008), so this increase in options for women and lesbians has decreased the options for male same-sex couples, and many consider surrogacy to be the only remaining option. As such, surrogacy is widely considered one of the major remaining issues for the LGBTQ movement (Eng 2012).

### **The Representation of Surrogacy in *Barn till varje pris*?**

*Barn till varje pris?* is presented as a documentary series consisting of six episodes of approximately fifty minutes.<sup>5</sup> It stars a number of "real" people who struggle to have children via reproductive travel. In addition to Andreas and John who turn to surrogacy in India, it features, among others, a heterosexual couple without children, a single woman traveling to Denmark for insemination, and a heterosexual couple turning

to transnational adoption. The different stories of fertility travel – with each story illustrating a particular method – give personal accounts of the longing for children as a lived experience. In pursuing its declared aim, which is to challenge the reproductive norm, *Barn till varje pris?* thus employs the strategy of giving a face to an otherwise abstract issue (Berlant 1997, 187). The variety of individual narratives is combined with reports and conversations between the host, Pia Johansson, a well-known Swedish actress, and invited guests. Johansson's personal experience of involuntary childlessness is an important ingredient in the program. The framing is personal and playful; scenes of Johansson running around with kids on a playground, visiting a sperm bank in Denmark, and investigating sex selection in Cyprus are mixed with sequences that narrate the different personal stories. In each episode three invited guests with either professional or personal experience come together for discussions in Johansson's kitchen. *Barn till varje pris?* may be described as infotainment (Bignell 2005, 63), and is aimed at being both personal and informative, entertaining and serious. The series was accompanied by an ambitious website. As already mentioned, it won both high viewing rates and praise among critics for offering a nuanced perspective on a complicated issue.

### **Andreas and John**

In the first episode, Andreas and John are introduced as the couple representing the controversial reproductive method. However, from the very first scene, the potentially challenging charge of surrogacy is smoothed over. In this first scene the couple is visiting John's grandmother Märta at the retirement home, bringing her the good news that their surrogate has been confirmed pregnant. In the concluding scene of the documentary, we meet Märta again, this time through a Skype conversation with Andreas and John, who are now in India, with John holding their newborn baby girl in his arms. Through this framing, controversy is embedded into the conventions and continuity of family relations over generations. Through the computer screen Märta rhetorically asks: "Aren't you happy now?" to which the two respond: "Yes we are!" (Episode 6)

When asking how they feel, she reiterates the focus on Andreas and John's emotions that has been established throughout the series. In presenting themselves and their motives for turning to surrogacy, they speak of their experiences as gay men in a heteronormative society, excluded from conventional family forming options, and their grief of imagining a life without children. Even after their decision to turn to surrogacy, obstacles on multiple levels remain; they are seen struggling with the legal system that does not automatically recognize surrogacy arrangements, and they share the experience of an earlier pregnancy ending with a miscarriage:

Andreas: The first attempt was a miscarriage, and of course, that was very hard for us. It was like a roller coaster, emotionally, that first attempt, so, you hesitate a little. How many times will I have the strength to do this? So, it becomes, the money really becomes the least you invest in it, it is the emotional part, I think, that has been challenging.

John: Yes, absolutely. The money is really only a side matter in the whole thing.

Andreas: A Volvo V70.

John: Yes.

(Episode 1)

In this sequence, as Andreas and John elaborate on the turmoil and heartache of the miscarriage, the emotional cost is singled out as the stumbling block of surrogacy. Their experience makes the monetary cost of surrogacy seem minor, even futile, translating to the mere cost of a standard car. I will return later to the opposition between money and feelings that is formulated here.

On the day of the planned caesarian, we meet the couple at a hotel room in Mumbai as they prepare for their departure to the hospital. The conversation that occurs displays the different personalities and roles of the two men:

Andreas: Are you getting nervous now?

John: Oh, it comes and goes. One minute you're cool as ice – looking

up the results of [the soccer team] Djurgården – and the next minute you're in a state of decay. I mean, you've fantasized about this day for so, imagined it, so many times, how it, well, and then you don't get it when it does come, so that, that is probably why I, that I, in any case, that I feel so, that you get so nervous, or that it. And then you have to take care of the one that appears.

Andreas: It will be fine.

(Episode 6)

John appears to be more direct and outspoken, while Andreas gives a more restrained and analytical impression. In this sequence, he confidently reassures John. John's statements are often humoristic, as in his way of speaking in this example, regarding his nervousness being not only about the delivery itself, but also about actually having to take care of "the one that appears." All the anticipations and expectations surrounding the delivery explain the drastic mood swings, he speculates. After the delivery we encounter the couple with the newborn baby girl in their arms. The scene of newfound baby happiness is introduced to the solemn and obeisant tunes of "My Own Home" from the *Jungle Book* soundtrack. The scene offers a perspective from which to consider the turbulence now past, that culminates on this day of the delivery. The image of the roller coaster returns:

Andreas: No, but it has been, like, a roller coaster emotionally, during the whole year, so that. I guess that is what we felt today, that today became the release for everything; it really came to a head.

John: Yes, but for a while down there when we sat there, we almost felt like vomiting, it was completely.

(Episode 6)

The cumulated emotions create a tension so strong that it becomes physically painful. The host comments on the scene by stating that for the surrogate mother Geeta the mission is now over, whereas for Andreas and John it has only just begun.

Throughout the documentary, there is a distinct focus on the couple's emotional response to the predicament of childlessness, and to their feelings in particular situations. This focus installs a confessional mode of speech aimed at a personal, "emotional truth" that makes facts less relevant than authenticity and sincerity. Exploring the inner truth positions both speaker and audience as a witness, which does not invite argumentation and questioning, because you cannot argue with a witness; you feel what you feel (Jerslev 2004, 17; Koivunen 2008, 195). Andreas and John are entitled to their feelings. Accordingly, their discourse is never directly interrupted or challenged by questions of how and why. On the road from grief to bliss they come through as emotionally capable and insightful people, capable of reflecting on and communicating reproductive vulnerability as lived experience.

Emotions can thus be said to play a key role in *Barn till varje pris?* As pointed out by Beverly Skeggs (2004), the cultural significance of emotionality has changed over time in Western culture. From being seen as a mark of weakness, and connected with femininity and irrationality, it has now become a resource amounting to cultural, social, and political capital. In late capitalist media culture, one is counted as an individual if one appears to be a feeling person, that is, if one displays feelings in an acceptable way, according to the criteria of society and culture (Pantti and van Zoonen 2006, 211). In this way, to the extent that they adhere to dominant norms and power relations, emotions function as the "technologies of individuality" or that which makes us into individuals. I understand the continuous emphasis on the emotions of Andreas and John as a technology of subjectivity and individuality in this sense.

In a similar manner, the display of emotions in *Barn till varje pris?* is regulated by certain norms, in particular norms pertaining to sexuality, class, and gender. Andreas and John come through as a respectable middle class couple that struggles to get what most heterosexual couples can take for granted – a nuclear family. They are portrayed as an ordinary, decent couple that heteronormative society pushes to arguably controversial methods. Their desire to parenthood is a culturally valued yearning in Sweden, where ideal masculinity is often pictured as a gender

equal husband and an emotionally capable and dedicated father (Gottzén and Jonsson 2012, 8). In the following scene Andreas speculates on John's impending parental leave: "John is going to be totally engrossed by being the first one on parental leave. It's going to be his whole world. And I know that he dreams of going to a Djurgården game with a little girl or boy in a few years. Then happiness will probably be complete." (Episode 5) Andreas imagines John's parental leave as an emotionally fulfilling time of complete presence and dedication, for which John's vision of parental quality time and perfect happiness – watching his favorite soccer team play – is recurrent in the documentary. The strong emotions of Andreas and John are communicated without accompanying bodily gestures. Their restrained, slightly understated manners are a form of expression palatable to a Swedish middle class audience. Thus, it is not only about some feelings being more acceptable than others, but also about expressing them in a culturally appropriate way.

It is the focus on emotions that makes the "human face" behind the controversial method of gestational surrogacy visible, a face that appears to be just like "ours." In this way, the show illustrates the normative logic at work when similarity and identification are keys to understanding and sympathy. A potentially norm critical and new reproductive technology is assimilated within racialized and heteronormative frameworks in order to pass (Gondouin, forthcoming). Furthermore, when same-sex couples are granted parenthood and included in the "good" (that is, procreative, conjugal, middle class) sexuality, other sexual practices, family forms, and lifestyles will be deemed non- or less respectable. Redrawing the chart of respectability inevitably involves creating new lines of division (Rydström 2011).

## **Geeta**

In contrast to the personal address of Andreas and John, the surrogate mother Geeta's voice is seldom heard; she rarely speaks in the documentary and her words and behavior are usually mediated by either an interpreter or by how other people perceive her. For instance, Andreas and John comment on their different encounters with her and interpret

her behavior. In the following example, Andreas explains how the sight of Geeta's growing stomach inspires them with emotions, while Geeta seems to have a completely detached and unsentimental attitude, even towards giving the baby up after giving birth: "When you see her it is very special. You see the stomach and you know there is a child there, and we asked her the last time we saw her, how it would feel to hand over the child, but she did not see that as a problem, as we understood it." (Episode 6) Typically, while Andreas and John express a wide range of strong emotions, the representation of Geeta indicates no such emotional depth. She is either, as in the example above, presented as emotionally blank, or contained, as in the following scene where Andreas comments on the news that the baby will be delivered by caesarian, due to its relative largeness in relation to Geeta's body size:

But as I already said, she has been much more calm and stable than what we might have thought from the beginning, so she has told us to stop worrying and take it easy, and I got this, no problem, and. It seems that we have been the nervous ones...

Johan: Yes, I think so.

Andreas: In all this.

(Episode 6)

The anxiety of Andreas and John at the different stages of the pregnancy is juxtaposed to the surrogate mother's repeated assurances that there is nothing to worry about, and that she is not worried. Consequently, it does indeed appear to be just as Andreas and John suggest in the sequence quoted above, that it is they who bring in the nervousness. In addition, other instances in the program make claims that reinforce the image of Indian surrogacy as safe and advantageous activity for the surrogate, in particular representatives of the clinic Surrogate India who elaborate on how well the surrogates are taken care of, and the host who completes the picture of how this particular clinic functions, stating, for instance, that women are now queuing to become surrogates at the clinic (Episode 6).

Thus in different ways, others speak for Geeta. There is only one scene in which she is heard speaking for herself – the translation being given through subtitles – about her motives and thoughts on being a surrogate. The scene occurs during a meeting with the couple at the clinic, two days before the planned caesarean section. Geeta is accompanied by her husband Prushuttam:

Geeta: A neighbor here in the area has done the same thing and given birth to two girls. She told me to contact an agency and then it was an agent that brought me here.

Interpreter: Is it not hard to carry a child for nine months and then give it away?

Geeta: No, it is not my child.

Prushuttam: But to me it feels like that.

Interpreter: So how do you think that it will be?

Geeta: I am not worried.

Prushuttam: But I am.

Geeta: It does not feel like my child. Why would I feel that way? It is not my own. It's a good job. If it weren't right, no women would do it. It is good to help a family.

Interpreter: Will it not be difficult to give the baby away?

Geeta: They will take good care of the baby. Better than myself. The child will be fine there. It will have a good life with a bright future. Not the kind of life that we have here.

(Episode 5)

Geeta's narrative recounts the factual passage of events that brought her to the clinic. She does not mention any specific circumstance or motive that may have contributed to her decision and which might have made her appear as more of an individual to the viewer. Instead, she responds by referring to general statements on contract pregnancy as a moral good. When the interpreter asks about the emotional strains of surrogacy, she dismisses the questions by referring to rational arguments such as absent kinship relations and caring opportunities.

Interestingly, Geeta's husband Prushuttam intervenes twice, by claiming, on the contrary, that *he* does feel a special bond with the child, and that *he* does worry. This, however, does not lead to any reactions or follow-up questions. The fact that he does contradict Geeta in this respect is particularly significant in a context where motherhood is being discussed. In consistence with this unconventional allocation of feelings, it is Prushuttam who, during a visit to their home the following day, offers a glimpse at the specific circumstances surrounding the family's situation and Geeta's turn to surrogacy by sharing their dream of buying their own house, something to pass on to their son Barat the day they are gone. Prushuttam also asks Andreas and John to return to them with the child so that it will not forget them, indicating once again that he sees a special bond between his family and the child, which Geeta herself does not seem to feel. In the interpreter's rephrasing, this personal relation disappears. The question to which Andreas and John enthusiastically answer yes is a more general one, about returning to the country India, and not specifically about reuniting with him and his family (Episode 5).

### **For Love or Money**

The role of money constitutes another significant difference between intended parents and surrogate mother in *Barn till varje pris?* In the first episode, lack of financial resources – "We had no money and no Wallenbergs in the family" – is brought up by Andreas as the motive for choosing India. The lack of wealthy family backgrounds, which are in his words symbolized by the Swedish Wallenberg family, a veritable dynasty in Swedish financial and political life, is also the focus when the couple narrate the story of their house; they recount how they have been obliged to take bank loans in order to build the house of their dreams, a house that they have managed to build for less money than its actual value (Episode 5). This suggests that financial vulnerability should be added to the exposure that reproductive vulnerability represents. Andreas is a medical doctor and John is project leader but their professions, and the middle class position that they entail, is not mentioned in the

program. However, despite scant economic resources, it is not the substantial financial commitments associated with transnational surrogacy that matters to Andreas and John. This is made clear by John's comment in the scene that recounts the previous miscarriage mentioned earlier; money is a mere "side issue." It is made clear that love, and not money, is what drives them. Andreas and John are represented as generous and caring people, giving the surrogate Geeta more than they are formally obliged to. In addition to the actual surrogacy fee, the couple has committed to paying for Barat's schooling.

In stark contrast, when Geeta and her motives are considered, the economic compensation is made key. The number of years it would take for her to earn the same amount of money with another job is repeated, with emphasis, several times by the host. By never interacting directly with the protagonists, but commenting on and framing their stories, she functions in the show as an omniscient narrator with a privileged perspective. Consequently, surrogacy is presented as an opportunity for Geeta. Focusing on the financial remuneration presents surrogacy as equal to conventional forms of labor and constructs her as a commodity (Riggs and Due 2010), a process that is further facilitated by the distance and rationality that characterizes her (as opposed to the vulnerability of the commissioning parents). While the emotional investment of Andreas and John is incommensurable to money, money is the key to Geeta's involvement.

While choice is downplayed in the case of Andreas and John, Geeta, on the other hand is portrayed as a rational person acting out of self-interest. Such an account of a surrogacy arrangement stands in contrast to research that shows that not only commissioning parents but also women acting as surrogates tend to resist commodification and downplay individual choice. For instance, the ethnographic work of Amrita Pande demonstrates how, when surrogate mothers tell their own stories, choice and payment are seen as obstacles to their sense of self-worth: "They deny choice by highlighting their economic desperation, by appealing to higher motivations, or by emphasizing the role of a higher power in making the decisions for them." (Pande 2010, 988)<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, emotions are mobilized as an explicit answer to the

ethically and politically challenging aspects of surrogacy that the show raises. For instance, in discussing a trafficking scandal that had recently made the headlines in international media, the host remarks on how difficult these kinds of "horror stories" are for Andreas and John to manage. John continues: "It does not feel like this is our story or the clinic we have chosen. There are perversions of everything but we invest our entire soul and our entire lives in that just for being able to have a child and because of that this can feel a little unfair and tough getting that other picture." (Episode 1) Here their own case is distanced from abuse, which is significant for how their use of surrogacy is represented as exceptionally moral rather than recognizing how it is made possible by a structurally privileged position as white middle class men in the Global North. Privilege is turned into personal morality, and high moral standards and emotional investment are used to counter critique.

This way of arguing is validated by the host. In response to the critical question about whether one wants to give the story of an economic transaction to a child inquisitive of its origins, she opts for presenting transnational surrogacy as a question of love: "We loved you so much that we went to another mother in India." (Episode 5) After these words, there is a cut to Andreas and John in India. Once again, the response to critique is with emotional arguments. In a subsequent scene, the host declares love to be decisive and formulates a conclusion to the show: "[R]egardless of the method, children need loving parents, and at the end of the day it's about where *you* feel the line should be drawn." (Episode 5) In other words, reproductive choices are represented as dependent on individual emotional truths, the validity of which is strictly limited to that particular individual. It is thus a different sense of the personal compared to the 1970s exposure of private life as a politically charged arena that is being mobilized here (Jerslev 2004, 24).

### **Commercial Surrogacy and Human Dignity**

Thus far my analysis has pinpointed a number of defining traits that characterize the intended parents and the surrogate mother in *Barn till varje pris*? The series paints a picture of surrogacy in which the different

parties may be described by the oppositions freedom/necessity, rationality/affect, and money/love. Some of the consequences of this unequal distribution have already been suggested, such as emotionality being a way of justifying surrogacy and dismissing its ethically challenging dimensions. Emotions have also been distinguished as an important device to construct individuals to be met with identification, understanding, and sympathy. Geeta, on the other hand, remains distant to the viewer; she is offered few occasions to speak herself, and expresses little emotion. As a consequence, she does not appear as an individual that one may understand, or identify and sympathize with. In this context, the rationality and autonomy that is so emphatically ascribed to her play an ambiguous role.

In this section, I wish to further the analysis by paying specific attention to the functioning of rationality and autonomy. For that purpose, I will turn to an ongoing discussion in transnational feminism that responds to what has been called the "ethnographic turn" in feminist research on surrogacy (Bailey 2011). It departs from the widely felt need to formulate a common feminist response to the commodifying processes at work in new reproductive technologies such as commercial surrogacy. Importantly, it is a response mindful of the fact that the impact of reproductive technologies varies significantly between different groups of women, creating more opportunities and freedom for some, while for others who lack resources and access, it carries the potential for more outside control and expropriation. Jyotsna Agnihotri Gupta (2006), for instance, argues for the need of a cross-cultural comparative perspective of assisted reproductive technology (ART). Because the interests and perspectives on surrogacy vary, Gupta sees ART as a testing ground for a transnational feminism. How can a common feminist response to ART be formulated that recognizes the heterogeneity of women as a category? Her proposal is a moral framework based on human dignity, "a moral framework that values individuals as ends in themselves and not as tools [...] which encompass[es] individual rights claims but go[es] beyond the narrow focus of individualism and autonomy for the protection of women's self-respect and human dignity" (Gupta 2006, 35).

Gupta's proposal is critically assessed by Michal Nahman (2008) in her ethnographic work on Romanian egg sellers. Although Nahman agrees with the need for a feminist stance on ART, she is critical of the particular terms suggested by Gupta. Drawing on the work of Ranjanna Khanna (2008), she explores the problematic of turning to a universal notion of dignity and the human right's discourse that is based on it. In Kant's moral philosophy, from which the concept is derived, dignity is what gives humans their exceptional status; dignity is equal to humanness, and contrasted with "value." The human is that which does not have a price, is not exchangeable and, as a means in itself, cannot be instrumentalized. Autonomy and rationality are closely associated with this notion of the human. The idea of dignity that informs Western philosophy thus makes dignity the hallmark of humanity. However, it is a concept that is built upon ideas of normality (Khanna 2008, 56), which proves to be problematic when confronted with otherness, with those who cannot be recognized as humans. Khanna writes: "[I]f dignity is the category through which bodies attain humanness, how does that concept shape the way alterity is understood?" (2008, 44) Does this entail that a human that does have a price has no dignity or is not really human and therefore excluded from the domain of morality? Khanna reminds of how, during colonialism, dignity for imperialist nations was built through the elision of the instrumentalization of colonized people. Colonialism and capitalism illustrate how the concept of dignity has been used strategically to instrumentalize bodies that were not considered human, and how this dehumanization made legitimate the exploitation of these bodies.

Some of the women in Nahman's study express a desire to participate in a neoliberal market culture – selling something in order to be able to buy something else – as their driving force, a motive that may seem provocative following Western feminist standards. According to the Kantian notion of dignity, their market value would exclude egg sellers from humanity, for how can dignity and human rights be claimed when the selling of body parts is made into a "right" (Nahman 2008, 71)? This illustrates how a universal moral framework based on "human dignity"

is not a useful one in the case of Romanian egg sellers.

A similar point can be made in relation to the representation of surrogacy in *Barn till varje pris?* As mentioned earlier, those in favor of contract pregnancy in the Swedish debate on surrogacy usually argue in terms of freedom of choice and autonomy, with a feminist twist, which when surrogacy on a transnational level in particular is at stake, combines with a nonprejudiced view towards women and countries in the Global South: *even a poor third world woman is able to make an informed, rational decision*. This line of thinking is succinctly expressed in *Barn till varje pris?* by Andreas' following words: "I have no reason to believe that Indian surrogate mothers are not capable of making rational decisions responding to the particular situations they find themselves in." (Episode 3) Furthermore, in the Swedish pro-surrogacy discourse, skepticism towards Indian surrogacy is sometimes equated to seeing India as an underdeveloped, poor country, whereas in reality, it is claimed, it is a dynamic, rapidly evolving nation ("Surrogatmammor" 2008; "Surrogatmödraskap" 2010).

The image of Indian surrogate mothers as agentic, rational subjects stands in contrast to the depiction of them as passive, helpless victims of poverty, patriarchy, and global capitalism (Sveland 2010). Consequently, the liberal argument is often presented as recognition of an otherwise denied subjectivity and agency (Bengtsson 2012). In a cultural context in which humanity is understood as autonomy and rationality, this attribution becomes a prerequisite for the fulfillment of the idea of surrogacy as a freely entered contractual arrangement between two equal parties. In making rational choices, these women prove their humanity. However, the very choice through which humanity is awarded is also that through which humanity is taken away. If dignity is seen as the marker of the human, "freely choosing" surrogacy, that is, freely choosing to sell or commercially exploit a part of their bodies – facilitates viewing women engaging in contract pregnancy as not having dignity, entailing their dehumanization and exclusion from the domain of morality (Khanna 2008). By stressing rationality and choice (as opposed to emotionality and victimhood), Geeta qualifies as human. However, what her humanity results

in is dehumanization. In this respect, Geeta's predicament is parallel to that of the Romanian egg sellers in Nahman's study. Critically assessing human dignity as a moral framework for ART thus helps unpack the ambivalent portrayal of Geeta as *both* rational and Other. In *Barn till varje pris?* the estrangement of Geeta is also facilitated through the absence of emotions, pertaining to a specifically contemporary mode – emotions as technologies of individuality – that I argue play a key role in creating identification and sympathy for the intended parents in the series.

### **Colonial Labor and Indian Surrogacy**

In the light of human dignity as an inadequate approach to the ethical challenges of ART, Nahman calls for an approach that acknowledges the logic of the marketplace without justifying it. The feminist response to ART, that she suggests, is a critique of neoliberal market logics that recognizes how "one may attempt to gain a sense of dignity within global capitalism by doing precisely what will perpetuate the system, buying and selling" (Nahman 2008, 76). In other words, a critical recognition of neoliberal capitalism's capacity to assimilate and live off the very attempts aimed at resisting it. She advocates a shifting of focus to the neoliberal global forces that position women in a place where they feel a need to commodify their bodies in the first place. This means also being attentive to how certain bodies, and not others, are perceived of as potential biological material, rather than as the source of labor: "What may be of importance are the ethics of who is positioned as *more appropriate* to sell a bit of their body." (Nahman 2008, 77)

Kalindi Vora's (2008; 2009; 2012) work on Indian surrogacy offers the kind of account that Nahman calls for. Through a focus on the colonial history that prefigures Indian surrogacy, Vora offers an analysis of the conditions of possibility concerning the present international division of reproductive labor, that is, why some bodies and not others are seen as the possible sources of commodification. Through this she also offers perspectives additional to the representation of Geeta. Vora sees surrogacy as a new form of labor – biological labor – a concept that designates the commodification of biological functions as opposed to labor per-

formed by the body (Vora 2009, 268). It is also a form of affective labor, that is, work involved in caring for others (Vora 2008). As affective and biological labor, it is both gendered and racialized.

Surrogacy is a form of labor that has been constructed as unqualified and rendered invisible due to its being part of a gendered division of labor that did not need qualifications in order to create contracts; it was instead secured by the institution of marriage (Vora 2012, 688). Affective and biological labor is excluded both from the classical Marxist definition of productive labor and from feminist critics of the divide between production and reproduction, as it includes both types. Furthermore, the processes of invisibility and devaluation are reinforced by new reproductive technologies and Western understandings of the body. The distinction between gestational carrier and commissioning parent is a case in point, mirroring the separation and hierarchical relation between the physiological aspects and the social aspects of human reproduction. The result is a view of surrogates as the mere bodies in which the genetic material is matured into babies.

Surrogacy is also prefigured by colonial labor, more specifically by the coolie system: a form of indentured labor that emerged as the slave trade was abolished within the British Empire in 1807. The distinction between freedom and slavery became decisive in that it enabled the creation of a category of mobile workers that complemented the colonial working force and justified the more or less slave like contracts that characterized the practice of indenture. Even in cases of evident lack of understanding on behalf of those signing the contracts, the absence of choices, or incomplete information, the said reciprocal consent obscured the many binding circumstances surrounding the contracts and helped to uphold the fiction of noncoercion underpinning Indian indenture (Vora 2009). Indian and Chinese coolies constitute a category of laborers that illustrate how the binary free/enslaved freely entered contract agreements; coercion and different kinds of dependencies have always been used strategically and in explicitly racialized manners (Lowe 2006).

Vora argues that contemporary Indian surrogacy and indentured labor in the colonial context are parallel in significant ways. As in the

case of the coolie system, the contracts regulating surrogacy are fraught with significant omissions and incompleteness that make ideas about autonomy and freedom difficult to uphold. In the present, there is no legal framing of commercial surrogacy in India; the draft Assisted Reproductive Technologies Bill of 2010, which offers only minimal protection to the women acting as surrogates, and which several critics argue primarily aims at protecting the surrogate industry (Deepa et al. 2013), has yet to be finalized as law, leaving the practice as it now stands subject only to nonenforceable national guidelines. Indian laws that currently define the status of women entering surrogacy arrangements are based on the equation of human gestation and paid labor, one of the implications being that the surrogate will only receive payment once the pregnancy is completed and has no say in matters concerning embryo reduction or abortion. Furthermore, should unforeseen complications occur during or after the pregnancy, coverage for medical treatment is dependent on the good will of the clinic or the commissioning parents. In addition, living in a special surrogate hostel and thus being separated from her family during gestation, which is a common procedure in Indian surrogacy, is not taken into account in the contracts. In a captivating sequence from the documentary, which speaks to this unrecognized "cost," Andreas and John visit Barat on his second day of school. The boy is crying and calling for his mother, who is at the hospital being prepared for the delivery and is therefore unable to accompany him herself (Episode 5). The prohibition of sexual intercourse with her husband, which current contracts may forbid, or the possible effects of the separation from the child that she bears, are other examples that are not taken into account in the guidelines. Interestingly, while Geeta responds that she does not have any feelings for the child and that it will not be a problem giving it away, this is mentioned in *Barn till varje pris?* as one of the potentially challenging moments in the surrogacy arrangement by the interpreter in the sequence centering on Geeta analyzed earlier, and by Andreas when speaking of her growing stomach.

The context of colonial labor in India is key to rendering legible the racialized and gendered division of contemporary reproductive labor.

The instrumentalization of consent, freedom, and choice, and the devaluation and rendering invisible of certain kinds of labor and laborers, is continuously working to position certain gendered and racialized bodies as available for biological and affective labor. More specifically, this perspective indicates how the strategic use of freedom and consent that distinguished the practice of Indian indentured labor within the British Empire prefigures contemporary surrogacy contracts.

In the case of *Barn till varje pris?* the emphasis on the rationality and autonomy of Geeta validates surrogacy as an arrangement based on a freely entered contractual agreement. However, the problematic character of surrogacy contracts – building on disputable assumptions and containing incomplete and absent information – makes ideas about consent and autonomy difficult to maintain. However, by stressing surrogacy as a free, rational choice, the kinds of dependencies and inequalities that surrogate arrangements are associated with disappear. In this respect, the practice of Indian indentured labor speaks to the understanding of surrogacy constructed in *Barn till varje pris?*

Furthermore, Vora's account demonstrates how the unequal distribution of love and vulnerability in the documentary performs a kind of fundamental political work necessary to reproduce colonial value systems as the basis for the emerging labor patterns of the present globalized world order. This includes reproductive work such as gestational commercial surrogacy, but also other kinds of affective and biological labor such as migrant care work and the transnational trade in organs. The nonemotionality of some, and the emotionality of others, "perpetuates the disavowal of the infinite sets of needs that must be denied to devalued subjects/workers as a condition of rendering their bodies and life energies 'surplus' and available for export" (Vora 2012, 696). As she remarks, the argument that the affordability of Indian surrogacy reflects low living costs does not acknowledge that the majority of the women contracted as surrogates lack basic facilities such as access to clean water, permanent housing, and basic health care (Vora 2012, 687). On the other hand, the one-sided focus on the emotions of Andreas and John consolidates "a discourse of white middle and upper middle class

families as needing more care than working-class families and families of color” (Vora 2012, 697). This is a discourse that makes differences in living conditions appear natural and validate more resources to certain homes whereas these remain necessities out of reach to other families. More specifically, *Barn till varje pris?* demonstrates how the inclusion of queerness into the heteronormative hegemony is achieved through the exclusion of other marginalized identities, in this specific case the racialized female Other.

## Conclusion

Representing surrogacy by a white middle class male same-sex couple and their Indian surrogate mother incites reflection on the complexity of transnational surrogacy. The intersecting axes of privilege (being white, middle class men) and marginalization (being homosexual) that characterize the positionality of the Swedish couple, and the positionality of the Indian woman contracted as their surrogate, involve incommensurable vulnerabilities and multidimensional power relations. This article explores how the different power regimes and vulnerabilities involved in representing this particular instance of transnational surrogacy unfold in the documentary.

I argue that the intended parents and their Indian surrogate are constructed through a number of opposites: freedom/necessity, rationality/affect, and money/love. Love and vulnerability are pivotal in the representation of surrogacy. However, it is unequally distributed; while Andreas and John are constructed as emotional, Geeta is made insistently nonemotional. What particular understanding of surrogacy does this promote? I argue that the couple’s love and vulnerability functions to justify surrogacy and to dismiss its ethically challenging aspects. Furthermore, emotions are crucial in constructing individuals that one can understand, identify, and sympathize with. In contrast, Geeta remains silent and emotionally blank and is thus harder for the viewer to engage with. The rationality and autonomy that characterize her become contradictory in this setting, the meanings of which are analyzed by drawing on discussions of “human dignity” in transnational feminist debates on ART.

The critical assessment of human dignity as a moral framework for ART offered by contemporary feminist debates enables an understanding of Geeta as both rational and Other. By stressing Geeta's rationality (as opposed to emotionality) and choice, she qualifies as a liberal autonomous subject, which enables the idea of surrogacy as a contractual arrangement between two equal parties. However, by exercising her humanity, Geeta is dehumanized.

Instead of human dignity, which does not adequately respond to the case of transnational surrogacy, scrutiny of neoliberal capitalism and its historicity seems more productive for an ethical assessment on surrogacy. Vora situates Indian surrogacy in a history of colonial labor in India, which also proves relevant for the representation of surrogacy in *Barn till varje pris?* In drawing attention to the parallels between Indian indentured labor and present surrogate contracts, she pinpoints some of the ways in which the autonomy and consent of Geeta appear problematic. Nevertheless, she also shows how stressing surrogacy as a free, rational choice makes the dependencies and inequalities that surrogate arrangements are associated with disappear, and how this strategic use is prefigured by Indian indenture. Furthermore, Vora's account makes the nonemotionality of some, and the emotionality of others, legible as ways of reproducing colonial value systems as the fundament of the emerging global market in affective and biological labor.

In *Barn till varje pris?* the complexity of intersecting axes of privilege is blurred by a one-sided focus on the reproductive vulnerability of Andreas and John, whereas the vulnerability of Geeta is understated. This obscures the particularity that makes transnational surrogacy such an intricate phenomenon. Emotions are used to counter the ethically and politically problematic aspects of surrogacy, and they are crucial for negotiating the inequalities that premise transnational surrogacy. Moreover, as postcolonial feminist research has pointed out, these power relations are historically charged.

In other words, I argue that the representational framework offered by reality TV is key for managing the complicated questions of power and privilege that this particular case involves. Returning to the discus-

sions on the intimization of media culture mentioned initially, I will conclude by claiming that this analysis shows that a discussion of surrogacy focusing on the experience of particular individuals is problematic because it overwrites the multilayered power relations involved in transnational commercial surrogacy and that is indeed putting the personal to political work. I imagine that a representation aiming to do justice to the exposure and vulnerability of same-sex couples seeking surrogacy in India may do so without diminishing the exposure and vulnerability of the women commissioned as their surrogates.

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the editors Jenny Gunnarsson Payne and Ulrika Dahl for their careful and constructive comments during the revising process.

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## NOTES

1. Indicated by searches for "Surrogacy" in the database Medicarkivet.
2. See, for instance Andersson (2010; 2013).
3. These parties are the Swedish Social Democratic Party (S), the Centre Party (C), the Moderate Party (M), the Liberal People's Party (FP), the Green Party (MP), and the Sweden Democrats (SD).
4. For a more detailed review of the debate, see Nilsson (2013).
5. I would like to thank publisher Mette Friberg and producer Lisa Jarenskog for making the material accessible to me.
6. However, as Pande (2010) has shown, the reluctance to talk about surrogacy as a business agreement is also a result of the clinic's disciplinary training aimed at creating a docile mother-worker subject, a procedure which obscures the surrogates' financial contribution to their families: "The narratives that ostensibly resist the clinic's disciplinary discourses and increase the surrogates' feelings of self-worth become instrumental in eroding the surrogate's recognition of the significant role they play as workers and breadwinners for their family." (Pande 2010, 988)

## SAMMANFATTNING

Artikeln undersöker representationen av surrogatmödraskap i dokumentärfilmserien *Barn till varje pris?* (SVT1 2011), där ett svenskt manligt samkönat par anlitar en surrogatmamma i Indien. Framställningen är emblematiserande för den svenska mediedebatten och illustrerar de komplexa maktrelationer som transnationellt kommersiellt surrogatmödraskap ofta är förknippat med.

Min utgångspunkt är rollen som känslor spelar i serien: kärlek och sårbarhet har avgörande betydelse för hur surrogatmödraskap framställs, men de är ojämnt fördelade. De blivande föräldrarna skildras som sårbara och drivna av kärlek, medan surrogatmammans framställning är rationell och påfallande känslolös och distanserad. Vad skapar detta för bild av surrogatmödraskap? Hur framförhandlas det svenska bögparets *reproduktiva sårbarhet* (Riggs och Due 2013) i relation till den indiska surrogatmammans sårbarhet?

Jag argumenterar för att kärlek och sårbarhet fungerar som *individualitetsteknologier* (Pantti och van Zoonen 2006) som skyller över de etiska och politiska utmaningarna i kommersiellt transnationellt surrogatmödraskap. Här spelar även sanningsregimer kopplade till genren reality-TV (Jerlsev 2004) en avgörande roll. Bilden av surrogatmammans analyseras med hjälp av en samtida postkolonial feministisk diskussion om surrogatmödraskap fokuserad på begreppet mänsklig värdighet och parallellerna mellan samtida surrogatkontrakt och indiskt kontraktsarbete under kolonialtiden (Vora 2012). Jag menar att den inkludering av queerhet i en heteronormativ familjemodell som sker i serien blir möjlig genom exkluderandet av den rasifierade, kvinnliga Andra. Dessutom visar jag hur dokumentärseriens ojämn fördelning av kärlek och sårbarhet utför en typ av grundläggande politiskt arbete nödvändigt för att reproducera koloniala värdesystem som bas för den snabbt expanderande globala marknaden för reproduktivt och affektivt arbete.

**Keywords:** surrogacy, gay men, affect, reproductive vulnerability, human dignity, colonial labor