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## Don't Look at Us, Look with Us! A Discussion about Multisituated Perceptions on Surrogacy

**Abstract:** This paper asks if ethnographic inquiries about surrogacy, the practice in which a woman carries a child for someone else, can be feminist and decolonial in their ethos? It asks this question in the light of the vexed histories of ethnography as a discipline that seeks to know the 'Other' and discusses research strategies that ethnographers who study surrogacy developed to overcome ethnography's colonial and masculinist historical inheritances. In doing so, the paper examines the concept of multisituated ethnography introduced by Kaushik Sunder Rajan. It discusses selected ethnographic studies about surrogacy that chart ways toward a feminist and decolonial ethos. The paper aims to locate different strategies of knowing and representing surrogacy that maintain the Other's subjectivity and train the imagination to envisage the possibility of acting collectively with the Other.

**Keywords:** surrogacy, labor, Spivak, multisituated ethnography, multi-sited ethnography

Schau nicht auf uns, schau mit uns! Eine Diskussion zu multisituierten Perspektiven auf Leihmutterchaft

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Beitrag fragt, ob ethnografische Untersuchungen zur Leihmutterchaft in ihrem Ethos feministisch und dekolonial sein können. Er stellt diese Frage angesichts der umstrittenen Geschichte der Ethnografie als Disziplin, die versucht, das ‚Anderer‘ zu kennen, und erörtert Forschungsstrategien, die Ethnograf\*innen entwickelt haben, um diesen kolonialen und maskulinistischen Blick abzulegen. Für diesen Zweck widmet sich der Beitrag der von Kaushik Sunder Rajan vorgestellten Idee der multisituierten Ethnografie und benutzt dieses Konzept, um ethnografische Forschungsstrategien im Hinblick auf ihren feministischen und dekolonialen Ethos zu beleuchten. Das Ziel des vorliegenden Artikels ist es, anhand der Idee von multisituierte Ethnografie verschiedene Forschungsstrategien zum Untersuchungsgegenstand der Leihmutterchaft ausfindig zu machen, die nicht nur die Subjektivität der ‚Anderen‘ aufrechterhalten, sondern auch die Vorstellungskraft schulen, kollektiv mit ‚Anderen‘ zu handeln.

**Schlagwörter:** Leihmutterchaft, Arbeit, Spivak, multisituierte Ethnografie, multi-sited ethnography

## 1. Introduction

Surrogacy has grown into a multibillion-euro industry over the past few decades. Thousands of online sites are dedicated to promoting surrogacy agencies and clinics that organize and offer surrogacy services for anyone who wishes to have a child and can afford the expense (Yakuppur 2022: 75). Despite its great success, surrogacy is not welcomed by everyone. For many, the idea that a woman becomes pregnant for someone else raises disaffection and concerns about her motivation and the broader societal forces behind it. Many critics fear that poor women might serve as surrogates to enhance their financial situation and regret this decision afterward. Others criticize that surrogacy treats children like commodities and threatens their dignity. Respective concerns led legislators across the globe to outlaw surrogacy. Countries in which surrogacy is currently illegal include China, Pakistan, and Turkey, as well as most countries in Western Europe and a few states in the United States.<sup>1</sup> While prohibitions in these countries are typically justified by the need to protect women and children, they also triggered the development of a thriving fertility industry to countries with no or permissive regulations. Today, popular destinations for surrogacy are countries like Ukraine, Georgia, Cyprus, and certain states in the United States.

Due to its controversial ethics and politics, global migration for surrogacy services has become a popular topic for ethnographic research to investigate. However, engaging in ethnographic research about surrogacy poses similar problems like research about sex work or the selling of organs and bodily tissues and other phenomena of disembodiment and marginalization:<sup>2</sup> Those who write about surrogacy are usually not serving as surrogates and often find themselves in a financially more privileged position than women performing this labor. This implies that writing about surrogacy is always a form of writing about the Other and comes with a risk of violence in representing the Other. This Other, the surrogate, is in a vulnerable position, as she risks being represented by the ethnographer in ways she cannot anticipate and usually cannot influence. If we further take into account that much of the writing about surrogacy is produced from the West while large parts of the practice take place in the East or South the critical question in studying surrogacy becomes how to avoid what Chandra Talpade Mohanty has called discursive colonialism – the idea that Western feminist analyses may have distorting and destructive effects on the lives of women in the Global South whom they are meant to represent (1988: 62). In addition, the question of class becomes crucial in surrogacy as the pool of people who act as surrogates and the pool of people who use surrogacy to start a family is not only highly stratified in terms of sex and race, but also wealth.

Feminist and postcolonial studies have been at the forefront of reflecting on the politics, risks, and importance of writing about *otherness*, *marginalization*, and *subalternity* (e.g. Spivak 1988; 1999). One of the most recent reflections on the ethos of ethnographic studies that engage with phenomena of disembodiment and marginalization was provided by Kaushik Sunder Rajan in his book “Multisituated: Ethnography as Diasporic Praxis” (2021). The present article discusses the decolonial and feminist ethos of recent ethnographic engagements