As women tweet pictures of their pregnancy tests, tabloid magazines devote sections to celebrity “bump watches,” and more and more expectant mothers create Facebook pages for their not-yet-born children, pregnancy and birth become increasingly public phenomena. Now more than ever, the pregnant body is monitored by doctors, family members, and even strangers. What was once considered a private experience for women is shifting into a public concern. This move from the private realm to the public arena comes with its own set of complications and concerns for pregnant women and feminist scholars. As feminist scholars are making clear, the meanings of reproduction and pregnancy are changing, and one consequence of these changes is increased surveillance and management of pregnancy and birth.

Feminist concerns about the surveillance and monitoring of pregnant bodies can be linked to a larger genealogy of feminist concerns about the surveillance and monitoring of women, generally. In the truly exceptional Seizing the Means of Reproduction: Entanglements of Feminism, Health, and Technoscience, feminist historian and science and technology scholar Michelle Murphy tells the story of feminist health movements in the United States, demonstrating the ways that these movements reclaimed the practices and processes of “women’s health.” For Murphy, feminist health movements of the 1970s and 1980s were engaging in “protocol feminism — a form of feminism concerned with the recrafting and distribution of technosocial practices” (p. 28). Women’s health movements engaged with reproductive technologies in a multidirectional process of uptake and resistance. Feminists, Murphy argues, sought to reclaim and reimagine the tools by which women’s bodies were understood (vaginal self-exam, abortion, Pap smears) as part of a political project of education and liberation. Murphy describes these technologies as “topologies of entanglement, that is, the uneven, spatial, and often contradictory traffic of connections that are the conditions of possibility of both technoscience and feminism” (p. 103). Her focus on the reciprocity between feminism and technoscience enables her to provide a rich and subtle picture of the women’s health movement that avoids romanticizing or homogenizing this era of feminist history.

Murphy is exceedingly attentive to issues of race, geopolitics, and class, and her analysis is historically

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**Special Section: Reproductive Justice**

**Surveilling the Body: Reproductive Technologies and the Pregnant Body**

by Liz Barr


**Born in the U.S.A.** 57 mins. 2007. Film by Marcia Jarmel and Ken Schneider; distributed by PatchWorks Films (http://www.patchworksfilms.net/films/flash_video/born_usa_vid.html). DVD: purchase by institutions, $250.00; by community groups, $89.00. Streaming video: online rental, $7.99 (personal use only).

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Seizing the Means of Reproduction

ENTANGLEMENTS OF FEMINISM, HEALTH, AND TECHNOLOGY

Michelle Murphy

An absolutely invaluable resource for feminist historians, science and technology scholars, and reproductive justice advocates.

The Internet and new communication technologies make surveillance more visible, more aggressive, and practically omnipresent. As technology changes what is knowable about pregnancy (through better ultrasound imagery, improved embryonic testing), society changes what is considered acceptable for pregnant women. In A Womb with a View: America’s Growing Public Interest in Pregnancy, Laura Tropp traces the shifts in our cultural and social understandings of — and relationships to — pregnancy and childbirth, rooting this shift in cultural as well as technological developments. Tropp makes two primary arguments: first, that pregnancy has become an increasingly public event, and second, that women negotiate this new publicity through their interactions with media and new communication technologies. She explores pregnancy’s move from medical experience to social experience, arguing that pregnancy today is a hybrid medical-social experience, and demonstrates how expertise is contested and redefined through media and other cultural practices.

Unfortunately, this focus on heterosexual couples does not allow Tropp to deeply challenge the heteronormativity of dominant reproductive discourses. Ultimately though, her critical analysis of pregnancy’s publicity, her use of culturally relevant examples and her clear and accessible language make this text a valuable resource for
students in media studies, women’s and gender studies, and cultural studies.

Like Tropp in *A Womb with a View*, Isabel Karpin and Kristin Savell interrogate the publicity of pregnancy in *Perfecting Pregnancy: Law, Disability, and the Future of Reproduction*, providing a thorough and detailed account of the ways that “women in contemporary Western society are encouraged to imagine their pregnancies as processes that can be perfected, indeed, that they have a responsibility to perfect” (p. 3). The authors are both legal scholars, and through detailed analysis of the ethics of prenatal testing for disabilities, preimplantation genetic diagnosis of disabilities, and termination or deselection of potentially “disabled” embryos and fetuses, they reveal the social and cultural issues surrounding pregnancy and disability. In chapters on disability, risk, terminations, and deselections, they meticulously detail the intricacies of existing legal codes regulating women’s choices in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe.

As Karpin and Savell make clear, discourses of risk and disability pervade Western cultural consciousness, motivating many women to seek information about their fetus’s potential risk and to do whatever possible to mitigate that risk. However, as the authors reveal, ambiguity surrounds concepts of “disability,” “seriousness,” and “risk,” making these decisions extraordinarily complex. For Karpin and Savell, “these uncertainties open up productive spaces for renegotiating ideas of normality and ablebodiedness” (p. 237).

Through its careful and critical legal analysis, *Perfecting Pregnancy* reveals the ways that legal discourse constructs lives and raises questions about surveillance and women’s bodily autonomy. Thus, it is a vitally useful text for feminist scholars, disability studies scholars, and critical legal scholars.

In another fascinating case study, *Birthing a Mother: The Surrogate Body and the Pregnant Self*, Elly Teman offers a compelling analysis of surrogacy in Israel, noting that although much feminist scholarship on surrogacy focuses on how women and pregnancy become commodified through the surrogacy process, little of it centers actual surrogates and intended mothers.

To remedy this, Teman conducted years of fieldwork with surrogates and intended mothers in Israel, her research resulting in a wealth of rich ethnographic data. She identified several themes, including ways that surrogates strategically disengage from certain parts of their bodies and pregnancies, how surrogates and intended mothers form connections with each other, how they form (or resist forming) attachments to the fetuses, and how medical and legal systems separate the newborn baby from the surrogate to form a heteronormative nuclear family.
Finally, Teman rereads surrogates’ stories through the lens of the hero(ine) narrative, arguing that although surrogates’ bodies are surveilled, monitored, and regulated, this “structural disempowerment becomes the grounds for these women to exercise agency; they use their subjection to mechanisms of control to elevate themselves above that control to a place of power they have never before approached” (p. 279).

Ultimately, Teman’s research shows how both women in the surrogate arrangement “together and individually, make surrogacy more about personal agency, gift giving, heroism, and birth — a mother” (p. 285). This gripping ethnographic study adds nuance to the theoretical debates about surrogacy, ethics, and autonomy. *Birthing a Mother* is an excellent resource for feminist anthropologists, ethnographers, and scholars interested in the global politics of reproduction and embodiment.

The documentary *Born in the U.S.A.* chronicles several women’s birth experiences, convincingly depicting the rampant medicalization of birth and providing sharp contrasts between home births, birth center births, and hospital births. The directors are thorough in their coverage of different birth experiences, arguing that — for low-risk pregnancies — birth center and home births are less stressful, provide women with more agency, and result in better outcomes for both mother and child. Viewers are encouraged to identify with the women depicted in the film and to invest emotionally in these women’s birth experiences. We cheer on the home births and hope that the hospital births are able to avoid medical interventions.

Unfortunately, most of the hospital births do result in medial interventions, and the unequal power dynamics between doctors and laboring women become clearly evident. As an example, MeeAe Rank, shown in the hospital delivering her first baby, had initially planned on a natural birth, but because her labor was not progressing quickly enough, she ended up needing a Cesarean section. After the delivery, MeeAe shares her disappointment at having had a Cesarean section and being the last one in the room to see her baby.

*Born in the USA*’s interviews with OB/GYNs are quite telling, as even these trained professionals acknowledge that many interventions happen unnecessarily. The directors film a hospital staff meeting where the doctors and residents discussed a planned induction that ended in a Cesarean section because, again, labor was not progressing quickly enough. One doctor noted, “It’s impossible not to have to go back and sort of wonder about whether we somehow induced, so to speak, this outcome by interfering with mother nature” (28:53).

Although race and class emerge as themes in the film (the home birth takes place in a very nice house; the birthing center is in the South Bronx and serves primarily Latina and Black women), the directors do not directly address these themes, thereby missing an opportunity to deepen their analysis.

Clocking in at just under an hour, *Born in the USA* makes a great resource for women’s health classes or introductory gender and women’s studies classrooms. The film’s clear feminist message about the need to empower women throughout their birthing experiences, along with its attention to the complicated issue of medicalization and childbirth, would certainly spark discussion among students.

As these diverse texts make clear, pregnancy and reproduction are increasingly becoming global feminist issues. The historical analysis in *Seizing the Means of Reproduction*, the cultural analysis in *A Womb with a View*, and the case studies in *Perfecting Pregnancy, Born in the U.S.A.*, and *Birthing a Mother* begin to elucidate the myriad issues that surround reproduction, pregnancy, and childbirth. As the pregnant body is surveilled and monitored, it becomes increasingly important for feminist scholars to raise questions like those raised by these authors and filmmakers. How do women negotiate the publicity of their pregnancies? How do women engage with the technological and cultural surveillance of their pregnant bodies? How are women negotiating agency in the face of aggressive reproductive technologies and cultural imperatives? The works reviewed address these questions and many others, ultimately arriving at the conclusion that, through navigating the complex terrain of public pregnancy, women are able to resist dominant discourses. The authors and filmmakers suggest different modes of negotiation, but all share a clear feminist concern for women’s autonomy and agency in spite of surveillance, monitoring, and public concern.

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