

REVIEW

Review of *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015)

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Value, labor, and commodity remain key modalities through which arrangements of gendered and racialized socialities become, as feminist scholars such as Angela Davis (1983), Maria Mies (1986), and Grace Kyungwon Hong (2006) have shown, sites driving systems of global capital. How might we interpret these modalities to explain the commodification of organs and bodies in India, as seen, for example, in the trafficking of kidneys to the Global North? Or to interpret in the ways in which low-cost surrogacy programs picture the wombs of women rendered subaltern as spaces for rent? Or in the making and enacting (which is to say, selling) of alternate selves in India's call centers? Works by Nikolas Rose (2007) and Melinda Cooper (2008) identified how emerging biotechnologies stage new ways of extracting value from bodies, and works by Lawrence Cohen (2001), Kaushik Sunder Rajan (2006) and Amrita Pande (2010) articulated how shifts in biocapital structure labor and subjectivity in India particularly. What are familiar about these arrangements, Kalindi Vora demonstrates, are the logics that extract life

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energies from subaltern subjects to support the lives of the elite. Kidneys, wombs, and alternate selves—these are some of the affective and material commodities that Vora addresses to demonstrate not-so-new divisions and territories of re/productive labor made both possible and necessary to sustaining global capitalism in biocapitalist times.

Vora's monograph, *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), maps the very material arrangements and components of life and living that constitute the conditions and possibilities of differentiated distributions of life chances under global capitalism. Vora situates this project across questions raised in postcolonial studies, critical race studies, and feminist materialist and science studies, reckoning with modes of accumulating wealth through increased formal structuring of reproduction, along with the new forms of subject formations and socialities that these formalizations enable (Vora, p. 5). She juxtaposes the embodied figures of Indian outsourced labor through ethnographic accounts, literature, and representations by and about call center agents, information technology workers, and gestational surrogates to argue that an analysis of contemporary relations staged by global capital requires a sustained attention to the imaginaries, subjectivities, and technologies shaping the projected capacities and extractability of certain human lives and human parts in service of others. Charting objects both material (organs, biological substance, and activity) and immaterial (subjectivities, imagined capacities of exchangeability) which constitute and enable social arrangements under biocapital, *Life Support* troubles what we know about "reproduction," "labor," and "commodity," attending to global forms of structural violence affirmed by technologies of population management.

One of the key contributions of Vora's project is the introduction of the concept of "vital energy," a concept with currency in object-oriented ontology and materialist feminism, to the interpretation of postcolonial knowledge production and labor in science and technology.

Contemporary works on vitality by Monica Greco (2005), Mariam Fraser, Sarah Kember, and Celia Lury (2006), Jane Bennett (2010), Kember and

Joanna Zylińska (2012) describe the substance of life as relationalities between actants that have the potential for change, creating new and unprecedented forms of being. Vora turns vitality to contend with the politics of its uneven spatial distribution by identifying logics under global biocapital that commodifies the vitality of some to its accumulation elsewhere. Describing vital energy as the “substance of activity that produces life,” Vora argues that its transmission from sites of life depletion to life enrichment under global capital is a continuation of colonial strategies of accumulation, where affective and biological labor transmit human vitality (p. 3). From scholars of biocapital such as Sarah Franklin and Margaret Lock (2003), Vora illustrates ways biological sciences and technology open up new strategies of accumulation through the isolation and mobilization of specific reproductive capacities of body parts to produce and extract value. Vital energy as commodity makes plain how biocapitalist accumulation strategies follow antecedent logics of colonial divisions of labor that extracts not only “economic (monetary) sources of value, or raw materials and labor-power,” but “life itself” (p. 4). Expanding how we conceive of biocapital, Vora points to the limitations of a commodity exchange framework, which does not fully capture the role biological sciences and technology play in the global extraction of life and transmission of vital energies. She critiques this framework for not accounting for how colonial imaginaries of “numerous and prolific and therefore replaceable” Indian populations persist and endure despite present strategies of accumulation in outsourced labor (p. 106). Of particular relevance to this argument is the book’s chapter on transnational gestational surrogacy, in which Vora argues that assisted reproductive technologies (ART) render surrogacy a low-cost service by restructuring relationships that laboring-class Indian women have with their wombs and biological functions, a restructuring that is undergirded by colonial management of reproduction. Citing studies by David Arnold (1993) and Gyan Prakash (1999) on the making of governable colonial subjects through the body, Vora explains that surrogates become subject to governability through medicalized discourses enabled by ART, disciplining

how these women relate to their bodies. Through interview data, Vora shows that clinical staff and medical and visual technologies facilitate the surrogates' reimagined genetics-based, property-oriented view of their bodies, instructing them that the providers of the egg and sperm are the actual owners of the child and that the surrogate's uterus is an empty space for rent. This genetics-based, property-oriented medical discourse about the body encourages the surrogate to legitimate "the carrying of 'someone else's child' without it being seen as a form of adultery" and delimits the conditions in which the surrogate would form an attachment to the child (p. 109). Steering surrogates toward previously unimaginable relationships without providing a full understanding of how surrogacy technologies work, clinical relationships rearticulate colonial projects, foreclosing alternative ways of inhabiting one's body, which is disciplined into being a proper subject both for the colonial regime historically, and, for biocapital currently. Vora shows how, though these means, knowledge production in the biological sciences and technology become a key strategy through which vital energies are produced and extracted under global biocapital.

Gestational labor exemplifies the inseparability of the worker from the commodity and complicates simple notions of biological exchange. The surrogates in Vora's work understood it was their bodies, the "blood and nourishment" coming from them, that were "building" babies, an understanding that persisted regardless of what form of official parentage or natal ownership the surrogates were encouraged to imagine or recognize (p. 110). Where gestation depends upon and redirects the vital energies of the worker (the surrogate) to successfully produce the commodity (the child), the surrogate's thriving is the simultaneous thriving of the commodity. Because of this inseparability, surrogates are instructed to take care of "themselves," their vitality thus naming both biological and social forms of life transmission that cannot be reduced to exchange. Outsourcing in India, Vora shows, cannot be solely described through quantitative markings of value: the work of representation (as demonstrated by surrogacy's renarrations of inhabiting the body) also

points to the life capacities of Indian embodiment and subjectivity, which become objects of extractability *par excellence*. Vital energy, then, names “vitality” as the actual content which constitutes Marx’s conceptualization of value and exchange, enabling an expansion of Marxist analyses of social arrangements under capital with differentiated systems and sites of extraction conditioned by colonial histories of domination and exploitation.

Life Support connects colonial histories of life extraction in India with the multiple ways that biological sciences and new technologies produce re-narrations and inhabitations of the body, often marshaling feminist critiques of capital’s dependence upon reproduction. The book thus provides an exciting addition to and productive cohabitation with feminist materialism, science and technology studies, postcolonial studies, and critical race and gender studies. Vora provokes us to ask how vital energy is accumulated through other sites of depletion under global capital, such as temporary overseas labor, migrant seasonal work, and the precarious; as well as other ways that biological sciences and technology might be informed by histories of coloniality.

Life Support’s attention to and theorizations of institutionalized forms of violence and socialities across material and immaterial components makes it a welcome addition to the *Difference Incorporated* series (edited by Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson through University of Minnesota Press) alongside recent works on global arrangements of capital and its rearticulations of violence such as *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* by Jodi Melamed (2011), *Humanitarian Violence: The U.S. Deployment of Diversity* by Neda Atanasoski (2013), and *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption* by Soojin Pate (2014). At a moment when ethical relationships staged by science and technology must be accountable to the racialized and gendered realities of postcolonial histories that sustain the on-going processes of global capital, Kalindi Vora’s book stages a politically urgent and needed intervention by asking us to rethink how knowledge production reinscribes colonial hierarchies predicated upon difference and uneven extractions of

life energies across the globe.

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Bio

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