

# Gestational Labor and the Politics of Privilege: Racialized Motherhood in Contemporary Drama

*Trabalho Gestacional e a Política do Privilégio: Maternidade Racializada no Drama Contemporâneo*

Rafael Antunes PEREIRA\*

Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS)

Jussara Leão BALBUENO

Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS)\*\*

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the representation of transnational surrogacy in Vivienne Franzmann's play *Bodies* (2017), contextualizing it within the framework of intersectional feminist critique. Drawing on theoretical contributions from Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Amrita Pande (2010), and others, the analysis explores how the play constructs motherhood and the female body as contested spaces shaped by global inequalities of race, gender, class, and nationality. The work argues that *Bodies* (2017) operates as an intersectional counter-narrative that challenges the legitimacy of legalized reproductive exploitation and exposes the moral contradictions embedded in the commodification of motherhood.

**KEYWORDS:** Surrogacy. Intersectionality. Counter-narrative. Motherhood. Reproductive exploitation.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo analisa a representação da barriga de aluguel transnacional na peça *Bodies* (2017), de Vivienne Franzmann, contextualizando-a no âmbito da crítica feminista interseccional. A partir de contribuições teóricas de Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Amrita Pande (2010), entre outras, a análise explora como a peça constrói a maternidade e o corpo feminino como espaços em disputa, marcados por desigualdades globais de raça, gênero, classe e nacionalidade. Defende-se que *Bodies* (2017) opera como uma contranarrativa interseccional, questionando a legitimidade da exploração reprodutiva legalizada e expondo as contradições morais da mercantilização da maternidade.

---

\* Doctoral Candidate in Language Studies, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS). Master's in American studies (Freie Universität Berlin, 2024), Master's in Anglophone Modernities in Literature and Culture (Universität Potsdam, 2021), and Master's in British studies (HumboldtUniversität zu Berlin, 2021). Campo Grande – MS. E-mail: rafatunespereira@gmail.com

\*\* Doctoral Candidate in Language Studies, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS). Master's in Cultural Studies (UFMS). E-mail: jusleao@hotmail.com

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Barriga de aluguel. Interseccionalidade. Contranarrativa. Maternidade. Exploração reprodutiva

## **Introduction**

Motherhood has historically been imposed on women as a natural destiny, associated with female fulfillment and completeness. This discourse, constructed by patriarchal structures, reinforced social roles that relegated women to the domestic sphere, care work, and reproduction. However, feminist movements have worked to deconstruct these impositions, demanding bodily autonomy and the right to choose. While many women desire motherhood, not all have the biological or economic conditions to experience it in the traditional way. In this context, practices such as adoption and surrogacy emerge as possible—though often controversial—alternatives.

Surrogacy becomes particularly problematic when situated within a globalized market. So-called transnational surrogacy allows economically privileged couples to hire women in developing countries to carry their children. This practice, deeply embedded in structural inequalities, raises fundamental ethical questions: Is it morally acceptable to hire a vulnerable woman to carry a child she cannot call her own? Does local legislation—or its absence—legitimize this kind of contract?

These tensions are dramatized in *Bodies* (2017), a play by British playwright Vivienne Franzmann, who has gained recognition in contemporary theatre for exploring sensitive topics such as social inequality, racialization, trauma, and reproductive colonialism. Combining realism with symbolic elements, Franzmann uses the stage as a space for ethical and political critique. In earlier plays such as *Mogadishu* (2011) and *The Witness* (2012), she had already tackled themes like institutional racism and the limits of journalistic representation. In *Bodies* (2017), these themes are intensified in her examination of transnational surrogacy within a postcolonial context of inequality.

The play follows Clem and Josh, an upper-middle-class British couple who hire an Indian clinic to implant a Russian donor's egg into Lakshmi, an economically vulnerable

Indian woman who agrees to carry the baby in exchange for payment. Through this narrative, the play explores themes of agency, privilege, suffering, and erasure.

In her chapter *Labouring the Medical: Female Bodies for Sale on the Contemporary Stage*, Gianna Bouchard (2023) analyzes *Bodies* (2017) alongside other works of contemporary British theatre—such as Satinder Chohan’s *Made in India* (2017)—to examine how the female body, often racialized, is represented as an object of medical and reproductive labor under neoliberal imperatives. Bouchard argues that these stagings reveal contemporary forms of exploitation, dependency, and inequality by combining theatrical aesthetics with intersectional feminist critique.

This article contributes to that field of study by analyzing *Bodies* (2017) as a play that uses intersectional counter-narrative strategies to problematize women’s rights in contexts of reproductive exploitation. Through its dramaturgical construction of bodies and motherhood, the play illustrates how literature can function as a tool for social critique and human rights advocacy—especially when it brings visibility to historically silenced subjects and exposes the moral and political contradictions of institutionalized practices hidden behind a veil of legality.

## **1 Intersectionality**

The theory of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991, is based on the premise that individuals can be simultaneously affected by multiple forms of discrimination, such as race, gender, and social class. In the case of Black women, for example, these categories do not operate independently but overlap to produce specific experiences of oppression. Crenshaw argues that traditional legal and political discourses tend to treat race and gender as separate categories, thereby ignoring the combined effects these dimensions have on certain social groups (Crenshaw, 1991).

In a 2016 lecture, Crenshaw illustrated this logic by highlighting how violence against Black women is frequently rendered invisible: while the names of Black men killed by U.S. police are widely remembered, those of Black women are often forgotten. She asks, “What

do you call being impacted by multiple forces and then left to fend for yourself? Intersectionality seemed like the right term to name it” (Crenshaw, 2016).

In the United States, intersectionality has become a central tool of Critical Race Theory, which exposes how the experiences of minorities are frequently distorted, erased, or whitewashed to satisfy dominant audiences. According to Bhopal (2017), intersectionality helps us understand how white privilege functions and how it is perpetuated through power structures—especially when gender and class are also at play.

The theory has been expanded by several scholars. Leslie McCall (2005) proposes three approaches: anticategorical (which deconstructs fixed categories), intercategorical (which uses existing categories to map inequalities), and intracategorical (which examines how category boundaries are constructed and crossed). This last approach is particularly relevant for making visible groups that do not fit conventional analytical models. Hancock (2007), on the other hand, distinguishes between unitary, multiple, and intersectional models. The first focuses on a single category; the second considers multiple categories in parallel; the third conceives them as fluid, interdependent, and mutually constitutive. Only the intersectional model, she argues, can account for the most complex forms of oppression.

Patricia Hill Collins, one of the foremost contemporary thinkers on intersectionality, reinforces the idea that race and gender are structures that organize power and define what counts as violence. For Collins (2017), intersectionality should be understood as an evolving social theory, not confined to academia but informed by knowledge and voices situated on the margins. In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019), she asserts that intersectionality has the potential to transform both knowledge production and political resistance.

In this article, intersectionality will serve as the primary analytical lens for examining the power dynamics present in *Bodies* (2017), with a focus on the relationships between gender, class, race, and nationality. This articulation makes visible the asymmetries that structure transnational surrogacy practices and the forms of erasure and exploitation experienced by racialized women.

## 2 Counternarratives

Literature has historically been a site where hegemonic discourses are reinforced—but also a privileged space for contestation and resistance. Counter-narratives (or counter-stories) emerge as interventions that challenge dominant narratives by giving visibility to marginalized experiences and silenced bodies. In *Bodies* (2017), Vivienne Franzmann deliberately uses this strategy: despite being a white British woman, she uses her position of privilege to tell stories traditionally omitted or distorted in the literary imagination.

The play can thus be read as an intersectional counter-narrative, one that exposes structures of power and privilege while giving voice and form to racialized women—most notably the character of Lakshmi. Franzmann had already explored similar themes in previous plays such as *Mogadishu* (2011), which addresses the racialization of teachers in British schools, and *The Witness* (2012), which critiques whiteness in photojournalism. In *Bodies* (2017), she centers the drama around transnational surrogacy, linking it to concepts of privilege, the body, and agency.

As Solórzano and Yosso argue, counter-narratives are both analytical and pedagogical tools designed to “expose, analyze, and challenge majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (2002, p. 36). They disrupt complacency, deconstruct official discourses, and push forward the struggle for social justice. This approach also resonates with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2009) concept of “the danger of a single story,” which highlights how limited portrayals of peoples and cultures—especially Africans and Afro-descendants—sustain stereotypes and marginalize lived experiences.

In Franzmann’s play, single stories—often centered on idealized motherhood and the altruism of surrogate mothers—are subverted. The audience is confronted with the moral and political complexities of surrogacy when viewed through the lens of global inequality. Lakshmi’s experience, as a poor Indian woman hired to carry a child for a British couple in exchange for money, is not presented as a free or empowering choice, but as the result of need, silencing, and coercion.

The critique of the absence of racialized people in Western literature is also relevant here. Nancy Larrick, in her seminal study *The All-White World of Children's Books* (1965),

found that fewer than 1% of thousands of children's books published in the U.S. included Black characters. Although referring to children's literature, this finding illustrates a broader issue: the systematic invisibilization of racialized subjects. *Bodies* (2017), by foregrounding Lakshmi, contributes to the construction of an alternative imaginary in which women from the Global South are granted space and voice.

Notably, Lakshmi's voice is only truly heard when mediated by white characters, such as "Daughter" (Clem's imagined child), which underscores the subaltern position of these women and the need for mediation for their pain to be legitimized. Still, Franzmann partially subverts this logic by allowing Lakshmi to speak directly at the end of the play—even if only in Clem's imagination—signaling the colonial condition of surrogacy. The next section explores in more detail how bodies and motherhood are constructed and contested in the play, continuing the intersectional analysis of its dramaturgical narrative.

### **3 Bodies**

The representation of corporeal bodies in *Bodies* (2017) is central to understanding the dynamics of oppression and privilege that Franzmann constructs. From an intersectional perspective, the play allows us to examine how class, gender, race, and nationality intersect to produce radically different embodied experiences—particularly in the cases of Clem, Lakshmi, and David. The dramaturgy thus functions as a powerful counter-narrative, challenging normative conceptions of agency, autonomy, and bodily integrity.

Clem, a white, wealthy woman living in the UK, has access to extensive reproductive technology, private healthcare, and legal protections. Her infertility, while causing profound personal distress, is framed within a system that legitimizes and validates her suffering. Her access to institutional support enables her to navigate this pain through legal and technological means. Clem articulates her anguish as a persistent and all-consuming loss: "I wake up every morning with this pain, with this corroding sense of loss, of displacement, of horror" (Franzmann, 2017, p. 76). Her suffering is real but embedded within structures of privilege that offer her options—and ultimately, a solution.

That solution, however, depends on the instrumentalization of another woman's body. Lakshmi, an economically marginalized Indian woman, becomes the physical site where Clem's reproductive desires are fulfilled. Her body is rendered serviceable—contracted, managed, and medically regulated by the clinic. Unlike Clem, Lakshmi does not enjoy autonomy or choice in any substantive sense. Her decision to become a surrogate arises from desperation following her husband's death and the need to provide for her children. The pregnancy is not a personal desire but a survival strategy.

Franzmann underscores this power asymmetry by showing how Lakshmi's pregnancy severs her from her own maternal role. She is not allowed to visit her children during gestation, as she "is not permitted to return home" (Franzmann, 2017, p. 80). Her body, repurposed for the reproductive labor of a foreign client, becomes alienated—even from her own family. Her voice is likewise mediated through white characters, most notably the imagined "Daughter," who serves as a narrative device to translate and validate Lakshmi's emotions and fears. For example, when Lakshmi expresses concern for her children, "Daughter" relays: "She has her own children to think about... she worries about them... fears something might happen because she isn't there" (Franzmann, 2017, p. 60). Lakshmi's direct subjectivity is thus effaced, reinforcing her structural subalternity.

Another contrasting figure is David, Clem's father, who suffers from a neurodegenerative illness. His body deteriorates, but unlike Lakshmi, he remains embedded in a network of care. He is surrounded by private caregivers, including Oni—a racialized woman—whose presence highlights the reliance of white families on the often-invisible labor of women of color. David's bodily decline is cushioned by capital; his dignity is preserved through systems that Lakshmi is excluded from.

Importantly, David also functions as a moral conscience within the narrative. Despite his illness, he articulates discomfort with the transnational surrogacy arrangement. At one point, he asks, "Did you know that in Russia, the surrogate has legal rights... and in India, she has none?" (Franzmann, 2017, p. 74). His fragmented but poignant speech introduces a critical reflection on the ethical asymmetries embedded in the surrogacy process.

Taken together, the embodied experiences of Clem, Lakshmi, and David construct a metaphor for global inequality. Clem suffers because she cannot gestate a child, but her

suffering is socially recognized, financially manageable, and ultimately resolved. Lakshmi suffers because she must gestate a child to survive, but her suffering is silenced and dismissed. David suffers bodily decay, yet his decline is buffered by care and support. Only Lakshmi carries her suffering without recourse or recognition.

Franzmann's dramaturgy reveals how bodies are marked and valued differently according to social hierarchies. The play renders visible the commodification of racialized and impoverished women's bodies in reproductive markets, while simultaneously critiquing the selective application of empathy and protection. In *Bodies* (2017), the body is not only a site of personal identity but also a political terrain shaped by intersecting oppressions.

#### **4 Motherhood**

Motherhood, often framed as the natural destiny of women, is in fact a deeply constructed ideal, shaped by cultural expectations, historical contingencies, and intersecting systems of power. Feminist theorists have long contested the notion that maternal instinct is biologically predetermined or universally fulfilling. Instead, motherhood is increasingly understood as a social role defined by structural conditions, economic possibilities, and ideological frameworks. *Bodies* (2017) interrogates this ideal by contrasting two sharply different maternal experiences: one rooted in choice and privilege, the other in constraint and necessity.

Clem's desire for motherhood is central to her identity. Unable to conceive, she experiences social exclusion and internalized shame. Her longing for a child is less about biology than about belonging—conforming to a norm that equates womanhood with motherhood. In her conversation with “Daughter,” Clem is confronted with a projection that challenges the maternal imperative. When “Daughter” says she does not want children, Clem replies, “When you meet the right person, you'll change your mind” (Franzmann, 2017, p. 78). Her statement reflects how motherhood is enforced discursively as an inevitable life stage.

Clem also articulates jealousy and resentment toward other mothers: “I hate people who have children. Not having a child makes me hate people who do” (Franzmann, 2017, p.

75). This confession highlights how motherhood operates as a marker of social status and normative femininity. Yet, Clem's wealth allows her to bypass biological limitations by entering a global reproductive market. She purchases a donor egg and hires a surrogate—thereby transforming motherhood from a personal journey into a transactional process.

This commodification is exemplified in Clem's preference for a Russian egg donor, as explained by Oni: "So the baby will look like you" (Franzmann, 2017, p. 30). Clem's desire to maintain racial continuity suggests how whiteness is not only preserved through reproduction but also bought and sold. Motherhood, in her case, becomes a curated experience—a product of consumer choice that mirrors broader neoliberal logics.

In contrast, Lakshmi's experience of motherhood is shaped by structural violence. She becomes a surrogate not out of aspiration but desperation. After losing her husband, she needs to feed her children, and surrogacy appears as the only viable option. However, her maternal role is suspended during the pregnancy. She cannot see her own children, and her body is placed under institutional control. Her maternal identity is dislocated: she is both mother and non-mother, a vessel for someone else's child while being physically estranged from her own.

Lakshmi's trauma deepens when she loses her daughter while away. The final stage direction of the play suggests the girl's tragic fate: "A little Indian girl dances on a table. A string tied to her wrist. She is made up. Far beyond her age" (Franzmann, 2017, p. 124). This haunting image evokes the vulnerability of girls in contexts of poverty and gendered violence, and it retroactively casts Lakshmi's sacrifice in a tragic light. Her reproductive labor did not secure her family's safety—it cost her everything.

Thus, while Clem gains a child through wealth and institutional protection, Lakshmi loses her child in the process of serving another's maternal ambition. Clem's motherhood is secured by global capital; Lakshmi's is dismantled by it. The comparison dismantles the idea of a universal maternal experience and reveals the unequal distribution of the "right to mother" across racial and socioeconomic lines.

Franzmann's portrayal resists romanticizing either woman. Instead, it critically exposes the socio-political conditions that shape their choices and experiences. Motherhood, as represented in *Bodies* (2017), is not merely a private emotion or bond—it is a contested

terrain where bodies, identities, and futures are negotiated under unequal terms. The play ultimately suggests that to understand motherhood fully, one must situate it within systems of power, labor, and global capitalism.

## Conclusion

Vivienne Franzmann's *Bodies* (2017) offers a powerful literary intervention into the contradictions and limits of human rights in contexts marked by structural inequalities of class, race, gender, and nationality. By dramatizing a surrogacy arrangement between a British couple and an Indian woman, the play stages the ethical and emotional abyss that separates the legitimate desire to become a parent from the systemic exploitation of women's bodies as reproductive resources.

The narrative makes clear that, in the contemporary globalized system, the right to motherhood is unevenly distributed. Clem, a wealthy white woman from the Global North, accesses reproduction through technology, markets, and contracts; Lakshmi, a racialized and impoverished woman from the Global South, has motherhood forcibly taken from her for the sake of survival. While Clem's suffering is acknowledged and addressed by a system that offers alternatives, Lakshmi's pain remains silent and unrecognized—ultimately resulting in the loss of her own daughter.

By constructing characters shaped by distinct embodied experiences—Clem, whose infertility is resolved through capital; Lakshmi, whose body is commodified; and David, whose physical decline does not compromise his dignity—Franzmann reveals the selective nature of fundamental rights. Not all bodies are protected equally, and not all suffering finds resonance in the public sphere.

Moreover, *Bodies* (2017) exemplifies the use of counter-narrative as both dramaturgical and political strategy. The play gives voice (even if mediated) to women like Lakshmi, whose stories have been systematically erased or whitewashed in Western literature. In this sense, it fulfills the ethical role that Antônio Candido (2000) attributes to literature: to act as a "right for all," offering those on the margins the right to be represented, heard, and understood.

The play also prompts critical reflection on the notion of choice. Clem's apparent freedom contrasts sharply with Lakshmi's coerced consent—shaped by economic and social constraints. As this analysis has shown, the very concept of motherhood is contested: for some, it is a personal aspiration; for others, a source of sacrifice and suffering. Ultimately, Franzmann's work compels the audience to acknowledge the lives that underpin normalized privilege. *Bodies* (2017) casts a critical eye on surrogacy, stripping away its humanitarian veneer. By revealing that for every legally acquired child, there may be another lost in the silence of some clinic, the play forces visibility on what dominant structures work hard to obscure.

This study reaffirms literature's importance as a site of symbolic struggle and a vital ally of human rights—particularly in denouncing practices that, while legally sanctioned, operate on profoundly unequal logics. Franzmann's play, by weaving together the personal and the structural, desire and violence, the body and the system, offers a searing critique of female exploitation in global capitalism and the selective distribution of rights to women around the world.

## REFERENCES

ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. **The danger of a single story**. TED Talk, 2009. Disponível em: [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story). Acesso em: 19 abr. 2025.

BHOPAL, Kalwant. **White privilege: the myth of a post-racial society**. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2018.

BOUCHARD, Gianna. Labouring the medical: female bodies for sale on the contemporary stage. In: APPLER, Vivian; CONTI, Meredith (Org.). **Identity, culture, and the science performance volume 2: from the curious to the quantum**. Londres: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023. p. 75–92.

CANDIDO, Antônio. O direito à literatura. In: CANDIDO, Antônio. **Vários escritos**. 4. ed. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 2000. p. 169–191.

COLLINS, Patricia Hill. On violence, intersectionality and transversal politics. **Ethnic and Racial Studies**, Londres, v. 40, n. 9, p. 1460–1473, 2017.

COLLINS, Patricia Hill. **Intersectionality as critical social theory**. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

COWDERY, Randi S.; KNUDSON-MARTIN, Carmen. The construction of motherhood: tasks, relational connection, and gender equality. **Family Relations**, v. 54, n. 3, p. 335–345, 2005.

CRENSHAW, Kimberlé. Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. **Stanford Law Review**, v. 43, n. 6, p. 1241–1299, 1991.

CRENSHAW, Kimberlé. **The urgency of intersectionality**. TED Talk, 2016. Disponível em: [https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle\\_crenshaw\\_the\\_urgency\\_of\\_intersectionality](https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality). Acesso em: 19 abr. 2025.

DE BEAUVOIR, Simone. **O segundo sexo**. Trad. Sérgio Milliet. São Paulo: Nova Fronteira, 2009.

DOUGLAS, Susan J.; MICHAELS, Meredith W. **The mommy myth: the idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined women**. New York: Free Press, 2004.

FRANZMANN, Vivienne. **Bodies**. London: Nick Hern Books, 2017.

HUGHES-HASSELL, Sandra. Multicultural young adult literature as a form of counter-storytelling. **The Library Quarterly**, v. 83, n. 3, p. 212–228, 2013.

LARRICK, Nancy. The all-white world of children's books. **Saturday Review**, 11 set. 1965, p. 63–65.

McCALL, Leslie. The complexity of intersectionality. **Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society**, v. 30, n. 3, p. 1771–1800, 2005.

NEYER, Gerda; BERNARDI, Laura. Feminist perspectives on motherhood and reproduction. **Historical Social Research**, v. 36, n. 2, p. 162–176, 2011.

PANDE, Amrita. Commercial surrogacy in India: manufacturing a perfect mother-worker. **Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society**, v. 35, n. 4, p. 969–992, 2010.

SOLÓRZANO, Daniel G.; YOSSO, Tara J. Critical race methodology: counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. **Qualitative Inquiry**, v. 8, n. 1, p. 23–44, 2002.

VORA, Kalindi. Indian transnational surrogacy and the commodification of vital energy. **Subjectivity**, v. 28, n. 1, p. 266–278, 2009.

WALBY, Sylvia et al. Intersectionality: multiple inequalities in social theory. **Sociology**, v. 46, n. 2, p. 224–240, 2012.

WILLIAMS, Bronwyn T. The truth in the tale: race and ‘counterstorytelling’ in the classroom. **Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy**, v. 48, n. 2, p. 164–169, 2004.