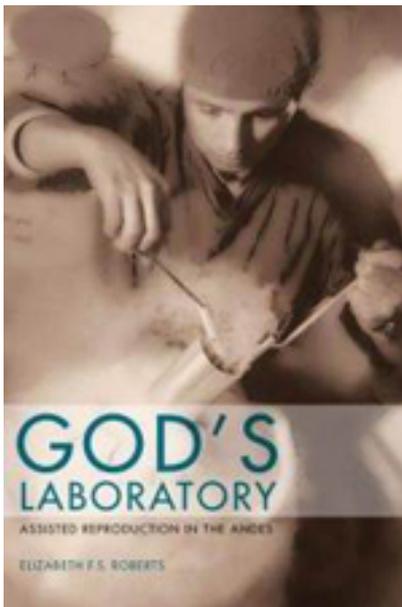


## ***God's Laboratory: Assisted Reproduction in the Andes*, by Elizabeth F.S. Roberts**

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Through an in-depth ethnographic study of assisted reproduction, Elizabeth F. S. Roberts, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, examines the malleability of the maternal world in urban Ecuador. Working closely with five of the nine country's IVF clinics, Roberts highlights the historical, racial and economic differences between Quito and Guayaquil as well as what makes "*nuestra realidad*" or "our reality" so unique for this nation. In *God's Laboratory: Assisted Reproduction in the Andes*, Roberts traces the role of interdependence over autonomy by uncovering the value placed on assistance in this context of care: a form of assistance that combines technology, human and spiritual entities. Moreover, she argues that assisted reproductive technologies in Ecuador fit within an existing local system that focuses on care and cultivating relationships rather than debating issues of life.

The book is organized in five chapters, each beginning with a compelling portrait of a woman undergoing IVF treatment. Roberts introduces us to Sandra, Consuelo, Teresa, Frida, and Vanessa along with their partners, family members and care providers. These intimate accounts highlight real patients' experiences with IVF and further illustrate Roberts' argument that "there is no universal body and no normative experience of embodiment" (18). These portraits set the stage for each chapter, and Roberts carefully integrates these stories within her theoretical argument, thus crafting an effective model of the ethnographic process.

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In chapter one, Roberts situates private IVF clinics in relation to the Catholic Church and Ecuadorian state. We meet Sandra, a woman suffering the consequences of unsafe abortions. Her story exemplifies what Roberts and anthropologist Lynn Morgan define as “reproductive governance” (38). It illustrates how state and church policies affect certain bodies differently, as illegal abortions on poor women become a form of “corporeal punishment” (67). Roberts uncovers a rationale based on relational exchanges, which is illustrated by women like Sandra who understand the consequence of their abortion as a debt to God and who understand the IVF process as reinforcing relations among family groups as well as with God.

In the chapter that follows, Roberts unpacks the history of *mestizaje* by illustrating how IVF participants are actively involved in the national whitening project. Roberts identifies “corporeal relations within biomedical care” as a factor in determining race in Ecuador (76). The story of Consuelo and Jorge, parents suffering tremendous debt after having twins from egg and sperm donation, exemplifies Roberts’ discussion of “assisted whiteness,” a form of care, interventions, and invasive procedures that literally mark women’s bodies (76). Procedures like dilation and curettage and cesarean section permanently scar women’s bodies, leaving signs of participation in private medicine and assisted whiteness. Roberts’ describes how women become “whiter reproducers not through education or professional advancement, but through being cared for the way whiter women are cared for” (75).

The importance of establishing kin-making through care is highlighted during the process of anonymous egg donation in chapter three. Roberts provides brief profiles of egg and sperm donors and shares the story of Teresa and Manuel, parents cultivating their son’s whiteness beyond the color of his skin through material practices and behaviors such as dress and education. In chapter four, Roberts uses key anthropological literature on kinship and exchange to discuss the economy of egg trafficking for women in Ecuador, a process for young women described as “a way to subvert their roles, to become the exchangers rather than the exchanged” (161). This process is described as form of female economic alliance, which strengthens existing family connections. Yet participation in this economy of exchange can also end in weaker relations, as illustrated in the story of Frida, who becomes pregnant with twins after receiving donated eggs from her nephew’s wife Anabela. Frida and Anabel’s story supports Roberts’ emphasis on the importance of cultivated kinship in Ecuador by highlighting three narratives of relatedness: genetics, blood (exchanged in the womb), and care.

The power of kinship extends to decisions of embryo circulation and cryopreservation in chapter five. As Roberts asserts, “The embryo is not everywhere the same: it is an object assembled within specific material and political realities through which practices or relatedness, personhood, and human life are articulated and negotiated” (210). The author draws on Vanessa’s story of multiple failed IVF attempts leading to the successful birth of quadruplets as a window into discussions on the cultivation of personhood and issues of abandonment. Like many IVF patients, Vanessa was relieved when God saved her from deciding the fate of her extra embryos, illustrating the importance of relatedness over life in Ecuador.

In *God's Laboratory*, Roberts contextualizes reproductive assistance in rich ethnographic detail to uncover its diversity of forms including medical, familial, and spiritual. Roberts offers an original analysis of the complicated relationship between technology and religion while encouraging more discussion, including cross-cultural comparisons, on practices of care related to assisted reproduction. An invaluable contribution to medical anthropology, Latin American studies and gender and women's studies, *God's Laboratory* provides an insightful analysis of the nature of person-making and the role of technology and faith to family formation.

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