

Ideologies and Technologies of Motherhood: Race, Class, Sexuality, and Nationalism

Heléna Ragoné and France Winddance Twine, eds.
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Reviewed by Veronika Novoselova

Ideologies and Technologies of Motherhood: Race, Class, Sexuality, and Nationalism illuminates how meanings and realities of motherhood are shaped by various cultural, economic, and political forces. This collection of essays is structured around three areas of inquiry: ideologies of racial difference, narratives of personhood, and socio-legal parameters of motherhood. The book consists of qualitative sociological and anthropological research projects that present the diverse voices of homeless mothers, adoptive mothers, surrogate mothers, single mothers, mothers of children with disabilities—in other words, mothers who do not meet normative expectations and are often perceived as existing outside of the cultural ideal of “good” mothering. Taken together, the essays explore motherhood as a socially constructed and historically situated institution, showing us how “mother” itself becomes a highly contested and ideologically loaded term.

Part one addresses motherhood as it is affected by cultural sets of ideas about race. The common theme running through the essays written by Christine Ward Gailey, Heléna Ragoné, and France Widdance Twine is that of redefinitions of kinship. In her well-researched piece, Gailey critically interrogates narratives of United States adoption and analyzes how they are engendered by a nexus of race, gender, class, and nationality. Ragoné discusses the growing practice of gestational surrogacy and its role in transfiguring notions of race while at the same time challenging “natural” aspects of reproduction (65). Twine’s essay focuses on the experiences of race and motherhood by white birth mothers of black children in British multiracial families. Twine reveals that mothers develop agentic antiracist strategies in response to a logic

that positions them as inadequate parents unable to comprehend the racial realities of their children's lives.

Part two deals with narratives of personhood. Linda L. Layne theorizes the "realness" problem of a pregnancy that does not end in a live birth (114). She looks at how parents use a range of material artifacts to construct ideas of fetal personhood and to validate parenting experiences that take place in a culture of silence surrounding pregnancy loss. Marcia Claire Inhorn explores the ways in which male-dominated biomedicine, coupled with discourses of religious and moral regulation, limits access to fertility treatments for poor women in Egypt. Gail Landsman critically examines narratives of mothering children with disabilities, and documents the active role of mothers in recasting these narratives.

Motherhood as an institution shaped by the socio-legal arena is discussed in part three. Susan Dalton offers a critique of California's laws that promote institutional heterosexuality and render non-biological mothers legally invisible. Diana Mulinari investigates motherwork as a political site for gender struggle in Nicaragua, emphasizing how maternity is caught up in the cultural contradiction of being ideologically reified and practically devalued. Finally, Deborah Connolly argues against romanticization of a mythical "good mother" by examining how homeless mothers are impacted by discourses that surround the conventional model of a middle-class, nuclear American family.

Overall, the careful research presented in this book validates the ability of mothers to actively negotiate and resist culturally dominant discourse. The primary strength of this highly readable and informative collection lies in its analysis of how the social hierarchies of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationalism intersect to produce a wide variety of ideas about contemporary maternity.