

Mothering by Degrees: Single Mothers and the Pursuit of Postsecondary Education

Jillian M. Duquaine-Watson.
New Brunswick, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2017

REVIEWED BY VICTORIA BAILEY

In the opening of the acknowledgements, Duquaine-Watson shares:

The process of creating this volume has been filled with both moments of absolute joy and numerous trials. At times, the trials took over and seemed unsurmountable, and I would put the project aside for weeks or months at a time. At one point, I even decided to discontinue the project altogether, tucking the completed chapters, observation notes, interview transcripts, and research files into the bottom of my filing cabinet and locking the drawer. I didn't open that drawer again for nearly two years. (195)

But thankfully Duquaine-Watson did persevere with her manuscript. Duquaine-Watson's text is nothing if not thorough, accessible, and most significantly, important. It frames struggle and challenges that no doubt continue to be experienced every day by single mothers striving to access and complete secondary education for a variety of reasons. And herein lies the key to *Mothering by Degrees*; students who are single mothers are not homogenous. They are individuals in aim of a personal academic goal sold to them, or believed by them, to be of benefit and a worthwhile pursuit.

The candor in the quote above also demonstrates Duquaine-Watson's engaging and frank writing style. The personalized story that opens the prologue of the book sets up a relationship with the writer that feels like an exchange along the lines of: "Others shared such personal stories, thus, here is mine." This positioning works as an equalization, serving to create a more equal power footing between researcher and participants. Though some of the included stories seem a little old; this may be due to the time span represented by the experiences and stories of Duquaine-Watson's interviewees, and the significant amount of time spent researching.

The chapters, especially the opening section entitled, "The Politics of Single Motherhood in the United States," provide an extensive and thorough outlining of history of experience, policy, and social and media perceptions of single mothers in the United States that demonstrates comprehensive and rigorous research. Duquaine-Watson affirms in the conclusion of this text that, "While four specific challenges emerged from my research, not all

participants faced all four of those challenges and not all participants faced them in the same way. Thus, it is important to begin by asking questions, [and] listening to the answers ..." (193). This text is a great first step in that process and I would recommend it to academic instructors, administrators, and policy makers to be inclusive in supporting and serving a significant, yet oft overlooked portion of the North American postsecondary student population.

Duquaine-Watson declares in the Prologue, "This project is ethnographic..." (11) yet in the same paragraph admits, "... I do not pretend that I engaged in this project as a sort of blank slate or that I wrote this book as a detached, dispassionate observer" (11). I wanted Duquaine-Watson to lay claim to being an advocate and overtly situate the work to fuel and inform activism and change. For example, in the chapter titled, "Trying to Make Ends Meet," Duquaine-Watson describes how many of her interviewees would freely provide detailed personal financial information that, "... felt almost too private to share with a researcher, even one who had promised to preserve their anonymity" and ponders if this was, "... due to the fact that they were seasoned pros about sharing their financial information," or that, "... their frankness about financial concerns was an indicator that the women had internalized a dominant American discourse related to poverty and single-mother-headed households," or that, "... maybe they had simply been raised in households that had very different attitudes about discussing personal finances than the household in which I had been raised" (44). Or perhaps there is a fourth possibility, and to be frank, it was the option shouting out to me between the lines and anecdotes. Maybe the interviewees experiencing daily significant struggle thought a researcher whose, "... academic interest lies, in part, in the persistent, pervasive, and dominant portrayal of single mothers as bad and in the blaming of single mothers for a variety of social ills ..." (11) might be able to make a difference. When Duquaine-Watson shares how she has, "... shared my findings at formal presentations at academic conferences, at invited talks and guest lectures to college students and community groups, and in the form of book chapters and journal articles," (183) she is indeed advocating for these mothers. Overall, Duquaine-Watson's work is accessible, thorough, and well-worth a read; its credible value speaks for itself, and most importantly, allows the voices of others to speak for themselves too.