

readable and informative and would recommend it to professionals working with families, parents, and parents-to-be.

Women and Children First *Feminism, Rhetoric, and Public Policy*

Sharon M. Meagher and Patrice DiQuinzio, eds.
Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005

Reviewed by Tatjana Chorney

This collection of twelve essays is an important contribution to feminist scholarship and contemporary cultural and political discourses shaping how we see mothers and children in the context of citizenship. The essays use a variety of feminist theoretical frameworks to analyze the rhetoric of heretofore unexamined American and Canadian public policies proposing “to put women and children first.” The essays reveal the paternalistic and “masculinist” logic underlying these policies whose real effect is disempowerment—sometimes harm—to those they ostensibly seek to protect. The book demonstrates in compelling ways that individual realities are linked to wider social realities, and advocates greater critical scrutiny of how the discourses of modern liberal individualism often obscure this crucial interdependence.

The collection is divided into five sections. Part one, “(Mis)Representations of the Domestic Sphere: State Interventions,” features discussions focused on the co-optation of feminist discourse in the rhetoric of American homeland security and defense against terrorism; the oppressive and exclusionary nature of the heteronormative family ideology in public policy as manifested in the Census; and the use of international human rights discourse in domestic violence cases whose rhetoric erases power differentials, reinforces constructs of middle-class motherhood, and calls for increased surveillance of poor families.

Of the two essays in part two, “Medical Discourses and Social Ills,” one documents through cases studies the tragic effects of the promotion of a rigid conception of sex and gender for parents of “intersexed” children; the other analyzes depression in women as a “social” rather than an individual phenomenon, finding its causes in contemporary culture whose persistent patriarchal values continue to devalue and debase women and mothers in ways that “colonize psychic space” (100).

The essays in part three, “Subjects of Violence,” reveal how a culture with traditional masculinist values celebrates violence when used “properly” in the service of protection, without acknowledging that “protection and predation are intimately linked to one another” (123), as well as remind us—by uncovering

the ambiguity in Battered Women Syndrome—that domestic violence is a social problem, not located exclusively in individual pathologies.

Parts four and five are more directly focused on the theoretical and practical implications of motherhood. In part four, “Mothers, Good and Bad: Marginalizing Mothers and Idealizing Children,” the authors show how the rhetoric of child protection agencies in Canada implies that the women referred to as “toxic moms” produce children who end up in the sex trade, and explore the disagreement in public policy over what counts as harm and under what circumstances a mother should be held accountable for making risky choices during pregnancy. The authors of essays in part five, “Protesting Mothers: Politics under the Sign of Motherhood,” argue that motherhood did not afford women a platform from which they could articulate a meaningful critique of the military state during the Gulf War, and that the deployment of the “essential” motherhood discourse during the Million Mom March in 1995 obscured the extent to which “individualism itself defines subjectivity in terms of situations and experiences more typical of men than of women” (229).

All twelve essays “interrupt dominant discourses by deconstructing their logic” (133). *Women and Children First*, a book I highly recommend, offers a set of much needed perspectives on contemporary society.

The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars *Who Decides What Makes a Good Mother?*

Miriam Peskowitz.
Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2005

Reviewed by Jessica Smartt Gullion

If the media are to be believed, there is an ongoing battle between stay-at-home mothers and working mothers. Which mother is better? Who provides the best environment for her children? Mothers are constantly judging each other in the quest to be declared the best.

In *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars*, Miriam Peskowitz deconstructs the much-hyped Mommy Wars. In truth, writes Peskowitz, mothers cannot be divided into two neat, opposing groups. Many mothers alternate between staying at home full-time, working for pay full-time outside the home, and taking on part-time paid employment, sometimes done at home and sometimes done outside the home. The result of this fragmentation is that mothers divided do not band together and insist on social changes that would benefit all parents. Yet, as Peskowitz demonstrates, social change is needed.

Public discourse has relegated the subject of parenting to the realms of personal choice and private responsibility. Yet the “choice” to parent has