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**Book Review: *Negotiating Social Contexts: Identities of Biracial College Women* by Andra M. Basu**

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norms differ along class, as well as racial/cultural lines. Her examples are restricted to Anglo and African American ideologies and styles of motherhood, and while it would have been interesting to see her interrogate a broader spectrum of norms and practices, her foci speak to her extensive research in these cultural communities. Her critique of traditional feminist theories on mothering requires expansion, as she does not address the lack of space within feminism for stay-at-home mothers. This parenting model is often scorned as "non-feminist," which may alienate mothers who subscribe to feminist ideals and yet feel judged or rejected by feminism.

I recognize that in order for O'Reilly to create a space for discussions of feminist mothering, there is a need to define what that is. At the same time, by creating a definition of feminist mothering she runs the risk of recreating a new meta-narrative on the right way to mother, and thus, this task needs to be done with the greatest of care. That said, *Rocking the Cradle* is an insightful and well-written examination of motherhood in North America, and offers valid critiques of both mainstream and feminist narratives on motherhood, as well as useful strategies for challenging them. It is well suited for use in multiple social science and humanities disciplines, both at the upper undergraduate and graduate levels, that focus on motherhood in western society.

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***Negotiating Social Contexts: Identities of Biracial College Women.*** Andra M. Basu. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, 2007; xi + 79 pages; ISBN 13: 978-1-59311-596-8; \$39.99US (paper).

***Challenged by Coeducation: Women's Colleges since the 1960s.*** Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Poulson, Eds. Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006, xii + 418 pages; ISBN 0-8265-1542-8; \$26.95US (paper).

The study of women's lives in college continues to be characterized by examinations of identity, context, and history. In differing ways *Negotiating Social Contexts*, a study of individual transformation, and *Challenged by Coeducation*, a survey of institutional evolution, succeed in elucidating a deeper understanding of the complexities women in higher education continue to face, despite the progress that been made in the last forty years.

In *Negotiating Social Contexts*, Basu offers a revealing picture of the lives of biracial college women. Through a mixed-methods qualitative study of 14 biracial women attending an urban college in the Northeast United States, Basu utilized individual interviews, focus groups, and written narrative data to reconstruct the nuanced experiences of her participants. She pays special attention to family, peer group, and educational social contexts to understand the ways biracial women make meaning of their racial identities, both for themselves and in relation to the ways these identities are constructed and reflected back to them by others. At times persuasively confident, and at others cautiously tentative, the voices of the women in her study help the reader to understand the complexities of claiming one identity as primary, both identities as a meaningful amalgam, or a third construct, "biracial," as their foundational sense of identity. Barriers to a full sense of belonging in either of their familial cultures are also examined, and the implications of all this for educational practice are also briefly explored.

By contrast, Miller-Bernal and Poulson's artfully edited volume turns the spotlight on institutional culture and its impact on American and British women collegians in the late twentieth century. Prior to the social tumult of the 1960s, high-achieving American women with a sense of intellectual purpose, as well as less motivated daughters of the moneyed classes hoping merely to enter into a meaningful marital arrangement with a young man of the Ivy league, attended women's colleges, which then numbered in the hundreds. Today, fewer than 70 remain,

inviting consideration of the factors that led to such a precipitous decline in interest in and commitment to women's education. Miller-Bernal and Poulson's treatise begins with the plaintive exhortation, "women's colleges are an endangered species." The essays included in the volume examine the social, institutional and economic factors leading to the current state of affairs. Case studies of those institutions that have weathered the coeducational trend, and those that have bravely endured the potential perils of becoming coeducational or being absorbed by neighboring universities, offer a candid assessment of all that matters about delivering "women's education."

The argument in both books centers around presumed uniqueness of the female collegiate experience, and the developmental and intellectual milestones reached by women that require the nurturance of a specific social architecture. From the ground level, Basu's work gives voice to the complexity of living as a border-straddler, both within and outside of two cultures simultaneously, in constant negotiation of belonging and visibility. Biracial women in this study have sought an enhanced sense of belonging in the cultural milieu of the urban college, gaining benefits from expanded peer support, identity-infused coursework, and the opportunity to both mentor and be mentored in their emergent and sometimes fluctuating racial identities.

The contemporary American women's college likewise places a premium on connected learning, the centrality of relatable female role models, and rigorous intellectual examination of social forces that contribute to the perpetuation of sexism. For that reason, it is argued, these colleges offer women a superior education, one that encompasses the whole person. Many of the institutions described in Miller-Bernal and Poulson's book, pushed to the brink of existence by the fashionable resistance to institutions constituted by feminism, are thus also navigating the borderland between single-sex and coeducational institutional worlds. In the lives of both biracial women and those of contemporary women's colleges, the path to

agency and a self-defined identity is marked by both challenge and triumph.

While both texts enlighten our understanding, notable omissions limit what we might glean from them. Basu's choice to focus on the family relationships and high school experiences of the women in her study limits the extent to which we can properly understand what it is specifically about the college context that has been both supportive of and challenging to biracial women. Devoting only two and a half pages to the campus and its impact on the women in her study, Basu leaves feminist educators with little food for thought about the ways in which design would aid biracial women in their self-discovery process. Miller-Bernal and Poulson's work includes only those institutions which have maintained a strong material commitment to educating women, providing important insight about how women's colleges can be successfully transformed and can persevere, but leaving little understanding of how women's colleges that have become coeducational may have failed in maintaining their commitment to women. Similarly, attention to lingering concerns about racial, class, and ethnic diversity at the most selective women's colleges are not addressed in this work. Additionally, the sole focus on American and British University contexts may render their study less meaningful to readers in other national contexts.

Minor shortcomings aside, both Basu's study and Miller-Bernal and Poulson's edited book make significant contributions to our understanding of what values, priorities and experiences assist women in achieving a fully integrated sense of self. Not surprisingly, tenaciousness, carefully cultivated relationships, and creativity typify both the ways that biracial women navigate a sometimes-unfriendly world, and the ways that many American women's colleges are continuing to thrive and adapt with style and with guts. Both works remind us that while the provision of a decidedly feminist college experience continues to be an uphill effort in today's educational marketplace, the rewards of doing so, for the advancement of all

women, continue to be worth the toil.

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***Women Teaching, Women Learning: Historical Perspectives.*** Elizabeth M. Smyth and Paula Bourne, editors. Toronto: Inanna, 2006; illustrations; 236pp; ISBN 0-9736709-3-2; \$24.95 (paper).

Despite the subtitle "Historical Perspectives," *Women Teaching, Women Learning's* historical focus is limited almost exclusively to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada. The two exceptions are Marjorie Theobald's examination of the legal contexts for early twentieth-century Australian teachers and Inga Elgqvist-Salzman's article on a nineteenth-century Swedish teacher. Even Susan Mann's article on nineteenth-century Canadian women who travelled to Europe focuses on how those women "harnessed travel to a domestic agenda" (179). Eventually, I developed an appreciation for the volume's tight historical focus, but still wish that the subtitle were more precise.

The volume's strength lies in the subtle persuasions of feminist social history methodologies. What often begins as the biography of one or two women builds, in essay after essay, to consider wider social and political implications of women's educational and employment opportunities in shifting ideological contexts, with a strong recurring argument for women's active roles in shaping those ideologies rather than simply working within them. This is particularly true of Rebecca Coulter's fine analysis of Donald Dickie's role in curriculum development.

I can't help but feel I have been charmed, at least in part, by Alison Prentice, the educator and historian to whom this volume is dedicated and whose influence is evident throughout. Diane Hallman and Anna Lathrop take up Prentice's work most explicitly. They write, "Prentice held that the close examination of individual scholarly women shed light on commonalities and

controversies in the relatively brief history of women in higher education and the professoriate" (45). Hallman and Lathrop turn Prentice's attention to women of "scholarly passion" to two more women, Irene Poelzer and Mary Hamilton, who took her educational projects outdoors. They conclude that the academy is but one site of scholarly engagement for women, and one that is always informed by institutional practices and contexts that may not be in the best interests of women. Alison Mackinnon's essay on the attitudes and opportunities of women who attended elite, women's colleges in the 1950s explores the historical and intellectual milieu that nurtured Prentice herself. Despite the decade's hackneyed reputation for conservatism, Mackinnon argues that the 1950s were also "the time when significant numbers of women first fully engaged in the changing and confusing struggle to be both intellectual beings and feminine selves" (209).

There are a couple of issues that could have been pushed further. Coulter's fleeting analysis of Dickie's positive although "somewhat sentimental and anglicized" representation of Aboriginal peoples in her textbooks is likely worthy of a separate discussion (32). Moreover, some contributions are marred by an unfortunate tendency to take women's words at face value. Mann, for example, insists that travelling women's diaries were "free of the exigencies of editor, publisher or even reader" (179). Diaries have not always been strictly "private" documents, nor have the boundaries between public and private been either impermeable or ideologically neutral. Despite her rejection of post-modern and post-colonial "invasions" into women's travel writing, Mann's own analyses of travelling women who "moved about quite comfortably within an empire, a class, a gender...[and] showed little inclination to explore, much less step beyond those confines... [because] they did not see them as confines" evinces Simon Gikandi's "complicity/resistance dialectic" articulated in *Maps of Englishness*.

Overall the volume's focus on larger ideological contexts, at work either at the