

Kaler, Amy. (2017). Baby Trouble in the Last Best West: Making New People in Alberta, 1905-1939. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

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Amy Kaler's book, "Baby Trouble in the Last Best West: Making New People in Alberta, 1905-1939", is a sociological perspective on the early history of women's reproductive experiences in Alberta. By introducing historical accounts of six different aspects of the reproductive challenges women faced in these years, Kaler explores the idea of an imagined reproductive economy. She defines this imaginative economy as "the ways in which childbearing figures in how people think of themselves, individually and collectively, and the way these meanings change over time" (p. 5). She employs the sociological imagination and applies it to women's reproductive challenges and how we value reproduction in different societal contexts. Her goal throughout this book is to untangle what society views as problematic regarding how children were made in Alberta, and the hierarchy built around the women who birth them – as well as the practices of these women both pre-natal and post-natal.

One major emphasis of Kaler's book is the importance society puts on the way children are conceived and born, as well as who they are born to. Some are considered more illegitimate, such as those born to unwed, young mothers – needed to be saved from their sins by becoming more productive women and potentially giving their children up for adoption. Specifically, at Edmonton's Beulah Rescue Home, these mothers were put to work doing household chores and

emulating a sisterhood of sorts, because “domesticity was equated with light and redemption” (p. 60). But what of the women who couldn’t be “saved”? These Albertans were considered lesser, destined to a life of prostitution and sin (p. 55). This created an economy not just of children and childbearing, but of a woman’s virtue and purity – something that can be lost and re-attained. In a later chapter, Kaler even explores the women and men who were considered “unfit to reproduce” (p. 84), because of mental deficiencies or social status, or even race. In this section, Kaler introduces us to a darker side of her imagined economy of childbearing, and the values we set on individuals’ rights to reproduction. Kaler isn’t afraid of showing the darker events and legislation surrounding childbirth in Alberta, exposing institutions such as the Alberta Eugenics Board and the racially discriminant undertones of their decisions on who was unfit to mother and father children in this province.

Kaler also explores the types of professions that were allowed in the early 1900s to assist with childbirth and prenatal care. This exploration weaves her imagined economy with the physical economic value of childbearing and the costs associated with giving birth to a child in Alberta. Her book makes it clear how the government and medical associations tried to profit off something as natural as childbirth, and how women’s hands were tied if they did not live near hospitals and cities. She also includes in this exploration another deep dive into the dark side of childbirth and the risk involved to the mother when giving birth. It’s rare to find books that are so open about the still-dangerous procedure of giving birth, and I appreciated Kaler’s scholarly take on this risk to women. She also gives credit where it is due to Indigenous women, and the “sources of information about safe childbirth within their own communities” (p. 23) and their resistance against

colonialism regarding these methods. Along with helping their own communities, Kaler also credits Indigenous women with helping white women with their difficult childbirths when the opportunity arose. This narrative shows how strong their sense of community was and how they were able to thrive without the interference of colonizers.

In her later exploration of post-natal costs and allowances, Kaler continues to blur the lines between an imagined, assigned economy and the physical economic values attached to motherhood. She does this well throughout the book, drawing comparisons between the concrete and the abstract parts of childrearing and rearing. Kaler presents to us a capitalistic and patriarchal view of motherhood, turning “women into social and economic problems” (p. 137). She successfully picks apart the capitalistic nature of how we treated mothers without coming across as antagonistic or extremist. All her viewpoints are backed up with irrefutable facts and statistics, as well as her own research into the imagined economy based on other sociological research. It could be viewed as dehumanizing to refer to children as if they are commodities, however Kaler does this to emphasize the economic values we assign to different types of people and how they contribute to society. As she states, we have always seemed to view motherhood as a form of labour, with the end-product being “good future citizens” (p. 110). This labour has not always been considered equal however to that of workplace labour, and Kaler documents the changes in our attitudes towards how women should be spending their time and earning a wage for their family.

Kaler does more than explore the commodification of childbirth and life however, as she also explores the capitalistic attitudes towards infant mortality rates and the state’s usage of such tragedies “to justify launching or expanding state interventions ranging from mothercraft to

eugenics” (p.140). She points to scholars going in depth with this kind of research and expands her scope to the overall meaning we assigned to infant deaths even before state intervention. She emphasizes the importance of referencing small town Alberta news sources for her research in this chapter, while still recognizing the gendered biases that occur in such a source due to the oversaturation of men owning the presses. She also emphasizes the people that have been left out of the narrative, once again recognizing the racial divide and the indigenous voices that have been silenced in the Alberta press. In the sources that she uses, we find shocking advertisements surrounding infant death and the commodification of such tragedies. It is important to include this information in historical accounts, even if one may find them upsetting. When looking at the past, sometimes we are confronted with facts that we may not be comfortable with, and Kaler weaves in this darkness of Alberta’s history – as with previous chapters – gracefully and respectfully.

Overall Kaler weaves together each of her accounts in a way that is approachable and easy to understand. She avoids language that is too dry or intimidating, and her points are clear and obviously well thought out. In her introduction she outlines all the routes she will be taking and why they are important to the broader context of her book. By utilizing the elements of storytelling and giving unique accounts from history, Kaler captures attention and drives her point home well. She clearly intends on exploring this imagined economy of reproduction and why we value elements of it the way that we do. She also identifies important sociological figures with similar outlooks on reproduction and applies their theories to her own research, such as Friedrich Engels and Susan McDaniel. Both figures have attributed social value to the act of reproduction and the

ways in which new people are formed, and she distinguishes herself well from them while also giving credit where it is due.

Although at times this book's content could be considered repetitive and wordy, the overall ideas spanning each chapter were very interesting. I think that if Kaler were to be more direct with her ideas it would have captured and held my attention easier. Kaler continued to surprise me with the content however and I would highly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in Albertan women's reproductive rights and experiences, as well as anyone with an appreciation for Canadian history. Academics in sociology as well as other social sciences would benefit from this book and find an interest in its content. Kaler dives into aspects of women's reproduction in ways that are not often discussed in modern literature and it's a refreshing viewpoint.