

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Minaker, Joanne and Bryan Hogaveen, eds.** *Criminalized Mothers, Criminalizing Mothering*. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2015. 410 pp., \$34.95 paper (9781926452012)

This is an important and timely book. When teaching undergraduate critical criminology and sociology of law courses, I am struck by the absence of scholarly attention to the lives of criminalized and incarcerated mothers, and their children. Oftentimes, students are keenly interested in the private lives of these mothers, the intersections between child welfare and the criminal justice system, how imprisoned women confront the uncertainty of their children's care, and how correctional authority has severed the relationships between mothers and their children. These conversations are fraught with difficult ethical tensions, that left untheorized and undocumented, easily slip into reactionary discourses of "bad mothers" and "in the child's best interest". As an instructor in these classrooms, I have had few resources to draw upon to contextualize and historicize the lives of criminalized and incarcerated mothers.

At set out in Kelly Hannah Moffat's analysis of early and mid-century penal governance of women prisoners confined to the Mercer Reformatory and the Prison for Women in Ontario, Canada, maternalism has oftentimes operated as a penal logic – a means of discipline and punishment of women prisoners by women reformers (2000). Indeed, throughout the 1960s-1970s Elizabeth Fry volunteers were positioned as experts of women's pathways to crime, constructing the tragic narrative of women damaged by maternal neglect in childhood, and therefore incapable of proper parenting themselves. By 1990, the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women revealed that many imprisoned women were single mothers, and loss of mothering and contact with children was one of the deep "pains of imprisonment". Mother-child programs within purpose built federal prisons for women were promised but never fully realized due to public and political backlash against such programs as "soft on crime". Today, over two-thirds of federally sentenced women in Canada are single mothers, leaving over 18,000 children under state care or placed with extended families (Balfour and Comack 2014).

Minaker and Hogaveen bring together mothers, activists, and scholars from around the world to document the untold stories of surveillance and regulation of women and their children long before the prison gates.

Rooted in the importance of “care” as a means to social justice, the editors have assembled a powerful collection of essays that attend to how mothering as caring work has been stigmatized and criminalized. The analytical structure of the book – the demarcation between criminalized mothering and criminalized mothers – moves the conceptual and empirical understanding of mothering at the margins. Part I explores the various practices of the criminalization of women as mothers and their mothering. In these essays, authors examine various regimes of criminalization and regulation of women as mothers. Important connections are drawn between legal discourse and media narratives of the deaths of Indigenous or immigrant children that erase the conditions of mothering (poverty, social isolation, overcrowding, gender-based violence). In a similar manner, the documented experiences of mothers of incarcerated youth, imprisoned pregnant teenaged girls, and women who abduct their children to protect them from an abusive parent, shed light on the stigmatization of women who seek to continue mothering their children, all the while navigating complex institutional security of visitation, accessing prenatal care, and international law. Part II of the book explores the various sites of regulation and punishment of women who seek to continue caring for their children; for example, decisions to mother or how to mother when living with HIV and confronted by intrusive medical surveillance, or how a woman in a Brazilian penal compound continues to care for her children through her extended family network. Across each of these chapters is a sense of urgency and agency as women seek to protect their children, but also the importance of caring in the lives of women.

What is striking in this collection of writings, is the refusal to essentialize women as mothers or nurturers, as was seen in the earlier feminist strategies to achieve recognition of women’s naturalized difference from men, but also mothering as a penal regime in and of itself. In *Criminalized Mothers, Criminalizing Mothering*, the editors have repositioned the caring work of mothering as both a gendered site of surveillance and criminalization, as well as a site of deep connection and compassion. Across each of these chapters, mothers come into view as living and working from the margins to protect and care for their children despite conditions of endangerment. I look forward to future conversations between academics and mothers’ of incarcerated men and women who have advocated for their imprisoned children, and drawn attention to the conditions of endangerment, such as Cora Lee Smith, mother of Ashley Smith who died in segregation while in federal custody in 2007, and Helen Mills, mother of Tona Mills who spent most of her adult life in segregation before being released into the community to receive appro-

priate mental health treatment. These are the voices of resistance and lived experience from the inside of the carceral state, like those voices captured in this book.

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#### REFERENCES

- Hannah-Moffat, Kelly (2000). *Punishment in Disguise*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Balfour, Gillian and Elizabeth Comack. (2014). *Criminalizing Women: Gender and (In)Justice in Neo-liberal Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Halifax: Fernwood Books.

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