

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

LISA M. MITCHELL, *Baby's First Picture: Ultrasound and the Politics of Fetal Subjects*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2001, x + 258 p. Index, \$63.00 (CAD) hardcover, \$27.95 (CAD) paper.

Although neither its safety nor its necessity has been established definitively, that at least one ultrasound will be done during pregnancy is taken-for-granted. In fact, fetal imaging has become a routine and expected part of pregnancy for millions of women worldwide. Anthropologist Lisa M. Mitchell explores the significance of this, asking how ultrasound's patterns of echoes become culturally meaningful and examining the implications for the politics of gender and reproduction. She weaves together rich ethnographic data and excerpts from semi-structured interviews with pregnant women and sonographers in Montreal to suggest that fetuses are "only partially of woman born" – that they "are not natural entities, but dynamic cultural constructions crafted to suit certain agendas..." (210).

In fact, a seemingly neutral diagnostic test in prenatal ultrasound imaging is shown to be anything but, with the discursive effect of constituting the fetus as a social and sentient being. The interaction between image, sonographer, pregnant woman, and partner transforms the echoes into a "baby" with an identity, personality, and a set of rights quite separate from those of the pregnant woman. In being subjected to a distinctive form of maternal surveillance (e.g., does the mother bond with the image?), Mitchell argues that women's reproductive autonomy is thereby diminished insofar as the procedure and discourse surrounding it align (however inadvertently) with the strategies and rhetoric of those who would advocate against reproductive choice. The book speaks a thousand words, indeed: the imaging ritual is loaded with gender politics and, as Mitchell argues so persuasively and concretely, the widespread fetocentric practice of ultrasound needs to be re-visioned – that is, used and interpreted in new ways that highlight female, rather than fetal, autonomy and agency.

*Baby's First Picture* is an important book not only for what it contributes to current debates on the relationship between technology and society, but for what it brings to current feminist scholarship on fetal personhood and women's reproductive rights. Refreshingly free of jargon, the work adds a unique Canadian dimension to existing critical studies of prenatal diagnostic medicine. Its contribution is particularly evident in the book's final chapter, which outlines several entirely doable changes that could be made to routine fetal imaging.

This reviewer, though, does have two criticisms to raise. First, Mitchell's sample was relatively ethnically and economically diverse, but one question that was left unanswered by the analysis pertained to the political implications of ultrasound for women occupying more marginal subject positions in society. Presumably there are certain mothers who come under particular scrutiny by medical authorities, namely lesbians, the disabled, the chronically or terminally ill, and aboriginal women. Some discussion of their experiences with the procedure would have rounded out the study and strengthened Mitchell's argument that the technology is used as a tool of social control. She acknowledges that ultrasound is a key moment in women's pregnancies when they are evaluated (by sonographers) against a cultural standard of suitability and worthiness as mothers. The experiences of women who do not quite meet the normative criteria would have been worth exploring.

Second, since one of the stated purposes of ultrasound is to screen for clinical problems, Mitchell might also have included some women in her sample whose "babies" were not developing "normally." This would have added further critical insight into the process of bonding emotionally with the fetus that ultrasound is apparently meant to facilitate.

Despite this gap in the argument, *Baby's First Picture* is definitely worth a read by scholars interested in the politics of reproduction and/or technology and society. The book also would work well in senior undergraduate and graduate courses on the sociology of knowledge, science and technology studies, medical anthropology and sociology, and possibly courses on ethnography. I strongly recommend it.

Shelley Zipora Reuter Concordia University

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