

# A Reply to the reviewer of *The Unheralded Majority*

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In her review of Lydia O'Donnell's 1985 neo-conservative book, *The Unheralded Majority, Contemporary Women as Mothers*, (*Atlantis*, Vol. 14, no. 1 — Fall 1988), Professor Norah Keating, who teaches a family studies course at the University of Alberta, promotes O'Donnell's book for its emotional leverage. "[I]t forced me to re-examine my assumptions about women's preferred roles" (p. 193). Keating did not have to add that the book is a comfortable one (that was obvious from her report on its contents), but she might have suggested that a study revealing that women "found it difficult to incorporate children into their lives" (p. 192), yet did not regret the tradeoff, was not a fresh one. O'Donnell (and Keating) tell us that feminists will feel uncomfortable with the book's agenda. Routinely speaking, yes, but boredom is first on my list of responses.

Keating's review, I think, was meant as a challenge to radical feminists who effectively criticize traditional institutional family life through the issues of wife battering and incest. O'Donnell/Keating are right, of course. The sky is not falling, but Keating, who has also written about women's work, is aware that the ground is shifting, unknowably, beneath our feet. Thoughtful, conservative *overviews* of women and the nuclear-style family firmly challenge the work of feminists who too casually use wife battering as social metaphor, but it seems to me that they do not have much more mileage than that.

There is more, however. As a result of reading O'Donnell's book, Keating is now going to include several models of "women's life course" in her family and individual development course. Obviously, family studies courses cannot escape biologism — at least not at this historical moment — but does it have to be as tidy and overtly agreeable as something called "women's life courses?"

Neo-conservative positivists like O'Donnell avoid Freud and Melanie Klein for well known reasons. (Re-workings of Klein may be useful at undermining masculine identity.)

Frankly, "women's life course" makes me recall the sort of asexual, tranquil/maternal information our health and hygiene/gym teacher gave us in high school, and the pamphlet on "the feminine life," published by Kotex, that I was given as a pubescent girl. You could not drag me into a university seminar on the tractable "subject" of "women's life course," even with "models" taken from theoretical physics. Curiously, there is more than a little hope here that neo-conservative and future conservative social/family theorists will actually bore their readers into developing fresh, intelligent social/sexual arrangements.

In the meantime, what most interests this reader in family studies at this historical moment are explorations of what is happening underneath and parallel to the freaky/not-so-crazy public phenomena of Child-Find and (usually reactionary) Father's Custody Support groups. There are increasingly open internal struggles going on within many young nuclear-style families around issues of the power, competence and feelings/pleasure in child-rearing. Privately, within these families, I believe that men are actively and strategically staking some claims to *small* children, that are not simply proprietorial or judicial, and that do not "really" or simply revolve around questions of sentimental moral education or play. A thoughtful feminist will immediately sense that this is not all good news. It is also the kind of local studies subject matter that requires much more sensitive, critical and less confident (smug) sorts of tools than those Lydia O'Donnell uses in her "well-argued" (p. 193), "representative" sampling of

“mainstream women” in “small communities across America” (p. 192).

One critical legacy radical feminists have given family studies (or, at least, those family studies not sponsored by most churches, synagogues and mosques) is the focus on power and the non-rational in private/social gender relations. Professor Keating was quite sensible as well as confidently naughty in her unstinting praise of *The Unher-*

*alded Majority*. She has allowed O'Donnell to make her point. (The *new* [?] synthesis, it is called?) But family studies do seem boggishly vigilant these days. Young, *forward-looking* feminists may completely lose interest. And why not?

(N.B.: *Atlantis* was unable to obtain a response from Norah Keating, who was on sabbatical overseas when this issue went to press.)