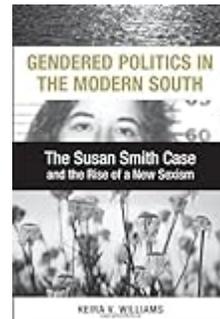**Keira V. Williams.** *Gendered Politics in the Modern South: The Susan Smith case and the Rise of a New Sexism.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012. 272 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-4768-9.

Gendered Politics in the Modern South: The Susan Smith Case and the Rise of a New Sexism

On the evening of October 25, 1994, Susan Smith, a hysterical resident of Union, South Carolina, claimed that, while stopped at a traffic light, she had been carjacked by a black man wearing a black sweatshirt and a dark cap. After approximately ten miles in the car together, the kidnapper let Smith go, but refused her plea for time to remove her sons, Michael, aged three, and Alex, aged fourteen months, from their car seats. For the next nine days the entire nation followed the search for the boys. Every day, Susan Smith and her estranged husband David appeared before national and international media to make tearful entreaties for their children to remember that their parents loved them and to beg anyone with information to step forward. Finally, on November 2, 1994, Susan Smith confessed to lying about the black carjacker and admitted that she had pushed her car with her sons still strapped into their car seats into a nearby lake. On that day, Susan Smith was undoubtedly the most reviled woman in America, not only for the murder but also for the lie. However, by late July 1995 Smith was no longer an infanticidal monster, but was instead a vulnerable, mentally ill woman whose community had failed to protect her. Although found guilty of two counts of homicide, she did not receive the death penalty; instead, she received a sentence of life in prison.

In order to understand the evolving analyses of the Susan Smith case, Keira V. Williams explores the political context in which the case developed. Using a variety of newspaper accounts, court documents, and interviews with Union residents as well as secondary sources dealing with the legal and psychological dimensions of infanticide, Williams chronicles the rise of the so-called new sexism in the American South during the 1990s. Rooted in the rise of evangelical Christianity and political neoconservatism, the new sexism was a backlash against feminism and the second wave of the womenâs movement. To explore the case and the impact of the new sexism on its narrative development, Williams contextualizes the murders by creating what she calls the seven âSusans.â These are the seven myths that embody the

changing notions of gender, race, and class in the 1990s and which both the media and the public employed to make sense of the horrific crime.

The first âSusanâ was the Good Mother. She was the white, middle-class, married, full-time mother who devoted herself exclusively to her children. Reminiscent of Republican motherhood, the cult of true womanhood, and June Cleaver in the 1950s, the Good Mother paradigm exemplified the new momism, which argued that women were unfulfilled unless spending every minute with their children. As the shifting religious and political landscape of the 1990s reasserted the supremacy of traditional gender roles, Americans became increasingly obsessed with both stranger abduction of children and the sexual abuse of children in day care, even though statistics from the period did not suggest that either of these was a pervasive phenomenon. However, media coverage of stories such as the Adam Walsh abduction and comments from politicians such as Newt Gingrich reinforced the notion that the permissiveness of the 1960s which attempted to liberate women from patriarchy undermined the stability of American families and society. Those messages, in turn, created substantial pressure for mothers to stay home with their children. When Susan Smith appeared with her husband David in her parents' spacious ranch home to beg for the safe return of her children, she seemed to be the epitome of motherhood. But this first mythological âSusanâ was the most ephemeral of the seven myths. No Good Mother kills her own children.

Another myth used to analyze the Smith case was nearly as short-lived. Susan Smithâs lie about a mysterious black male carjacker created the second âSusan.â This myth was founded on the notion of the white southern woman in need of protection from a predatory black man. This second âSusanâ highlighted the rise of both a new racism and a new sexism in the post-civil rights South. The new racism replaced the use of lynching to terrorize African Americans into political submission with a more nuanced, law and order rhetoric dating back to Ronald Reaganâs efforts to curry favor with white working-class voters, especially men. In the 1990s this more subtle racism fused with a new sexism that attempted to reassert patriarchal control over women by underscoring the vulnerability of those who lived outside the protections of family and male-dominated social structures. The fusion of these two perspectives created a political narrative that argued that the liberation of both women and African Americans in the 1960s undermined the moral foundations and political stability of the country. Coincidently, the only way to stabilize society was the reassertion of traditional, patriarchal values.

The juxtaposition of southern white, female vulnerability with black male bestiality transfixed the nation until Smith confessed. Although a few black members of the community protested the incendiary nature of the accusation, most of Unionâs citizens and much of the media quickly dropped the issue of race as soon as Susan Smith apologized for the lie. Most were eager to avoid any discussion of race, gender, and historical oppression. Rather, many preferred to define Smithâs lie not as a manifestation of racism, but rather simply as an acknowledgement of the preponderance of black criminals in the late twentieth century.

Williams posits several additional, post-confession âSusansâ to explain the shifting public narratives of the infanticide within the context of a resurgent political and religious conservatism. The media, in particular, struggled to explain Smithâs deceitful initial depiction of herself as a doting wife and mother and subsequently seized upon several additional political myths as expedient explanations for the unimaginable act of filicide (killing oneâs own children). One of these was the "boyfriend motive," in which Susan Smith was a promiscuous, scheming single mother who killed her sons to win back a boyfriend who did not want children. This mythic third âSusanâ underscores the evils of single motherhood, which in the 1990s became a scapegoat for a variety of social ills. Assumed to be rooted in feminist selfishness, single motherhood not only destroyed the bedrock institution of American life but also undermined the paternalistic power that shaped and protected that way of life.

Related to the notion of the corrosive impact of single motherhood on American society is the idea that Smith saw her rich boyfriend as a way to improve her deteriorating economic circumstances. This fourth mythological âSusanâ reflects the shifting view of single mothers as lazy and opportunistic, rather than vulnerable and unfortunate. A fifth âSusanâ highlights the assumptions of the southern gothic myth, in which the public values of evangelical Christianity coexist with private sexual perversions. Susan Smithâs stepfather, Beverly Russell, was a prominent Union businessman, local Republican officeholder, and a member of the Christian Coalition. He was also a long-time pedophile who had molested Smith for nearly eight years. Smith's mother condoned her husband's failure to protect Smith and refused to take legal action, choosing instead to preserve her familyâs public image. The sixth âSusanâ is the paradigm of a men-

tally ill young woman traumatized by the suicide of her father, victimized by her stepfather, and stalked by her estranged husband. Because of the failures of the significant men in her life to protect her, she suffered from long-term depression and suicidal ideations. These untreated mental illnesses contributed to the postpartum psychosis that led to infanticide.

By mid-1995, Susan Smith was no longer a monstrous perpetrator. She was, instead, the victim of her paternalistic communityâs failure to assist and protect her. This seventh mythological âSusanâ spared Smithâs life by arguing that she was ill, rather than evil, an argument that reinforced the conservative proposition that for white, middle class, married mothers, maternal failure is personal. In order to preserve the fundamental assumptions of the new sexism, the Good Mother must be suffering from a postpartum psychological disorder, not from a socially constructed malady exacerbated by a lack of affordable childcare or by acute financial strain.

This book is a well-written and extensively researched exposition of a very difficult topic. Williams deftly combines a deep historical perspective on race and gender in the American South with a broad interdisciplinary examination of the social and legal issues surrounding infanticide. As she notes in her conclusion, even contemporary feminists are reluctant to discuss publicly the challenges and stresses of motherhood. Until women across all racial and socioeconomic boundaries are free to express the anger and frustration they have experienced as mothers, the paradigm of infanticide will remain an ideological and political construct, rather than a psycho-biological or criminal one.

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