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West examines child care, 'myths of motherhood'

By Michael Alpert

Laurel Parker West isn't yet a mother, but she's already headlong into checking out child care. As one of three graduate fellows at the Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life (MARIAL), West has embarked on ambitious research focused on the national condition of child care policy and the perceptions of America's mothers. Her research precis—"Welfare Queens, Soccer Moms and the Working Poor: The Socio-Political Construction of State Child Care Policy"—bespeaks her seemingly overwhelming undertaking to examine policies in all 50 states

In keeping with MARIAL's purpose of researching and training in the study of ritual and myth in middle-class families, West's 16-month-long focus is on states' child care policies as created by four perceived categories of mothers:

- "welfare moms," perceived to be in greatest need of state-sponsored child care.
- "waitress moms," whose juggling of work and mothering grows increasingly more difficult.
- "soccer moms," whose working husbands enable them to participate in carpooling and PTA, making them perhaps least dependent on child care.
- "career supermoms" whose high-powered professions make them able to afford the best quality child care on which they are often most dependent.

West formulated this concept for her doctoral thesis nearly a year ago after canvassing south Georgia's Crisp and Dooly counties for a research assignment on welfare reform. Her interest was sparked further by a recent book by Theda Skocpol, *The Missing Middle: Working Families and the Future of American Social Policy*, which confirmed West's preconceptions that government programs increasingly are being aimed either at society's poor or at its wealthy—at the expense of its ever-widening socioeconomic middle.

"It seems incredibly hypocritical to me that politicians are calling for welfare mothers to work, while at the same time trying to make it easier for middle-class mothers to stay home with their children," West said. "It seems striking to me that ... if you are poor enough to be on welfare, your job as mother doesn't seem nearly as important."

Her research comprises two phases: first, an examination of politicians' and the media's typification of moms, followed by case studies in Georgia (and likely Tennessee) to review the implementation of state policies.

For example, West hypothesizes that rural states' policies and programs will focus more on "welfare moms" and affordability of child care, including vouchers for low-income parents. Conversely, more cosmopolitan states would focus more on quality of care,

offering government subsidies such as tax credits or head-start programs as well as encouraging employer-sponsored flex time and telecommuting.

West expects her research to be particularly revealing in four states: Wisconsin, which she considers a leader in welfare reform; Tennessee, which recently passed child care quality standards; North Carolina, which she said offers scholarships to train daycare providers; and Georgia, which boasts universal pre-K programs.

“I’m going to classify each state according to how it views the myths of motherhood,” West said. “I want to find out how these societal myths shape states’ concrete policies.”

West, who teaches an introductory-level public policy course, began last fall cataloguing Internet media articles about states’ child care policies. By February, she plans to mail surveys to legislators and child care policy makers to elicit their opinions. She will perform the case studies herself this summer. Hoping to produce an initial draft of her dissertation by December, West is excited about launching into an immense body of research.

“If there’s a graduate student able to complete something this big, it’s Laurel,” said Jolly Emrey, a colleague who worked with West on the welfare policy research in south Georgia. “She’s very organized and incredibly capable. She’s definitely taken on a huge body of work.

“I don’t think her dissertation is just something she’s doing to get her Ph.D.,” added Emrey, now a professor at the University of New Hampshire. “She really and truly cares about this issue.”

West is focused on making her research well rounded, including both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Not only does she plan to interview legislators about future focuses in policy, she also hopes to attend government meetings, state-level conferences and visit daycare centers. Interviewing lawmakers, West said, will provide valuable foresight into a career she hopes to someday enjoy in public policy and community development.

Michael Rich, director of the Office of University-Community Partnerships and the political science professor who directed West’s welfare reform work, said her research should result in a dissertation of great use to policymakers throughout the country.

“There are a lot of people looking at how much states spend on childcare, but I don’t know if anybody is looking at the particular set of questions she is,” Rich said. “Her project is certainly very timely; I think her work will provide some important answers to some big questions.”