Transformative Motherhood: On Giving and Getting in a Consumer Culture

Linda L. Layne, ed.
New York University Press, 1999.

Reviewed by Tatjana Takševa

The five essays collected in *Transformative Motherhood: On Giving and Getting in a Consumer Culture* straddle the disciplines of anthropology and women's studies. Implied in the subtitle is the book's focus on the rhetoric of the gift, gift giving and receiving in the context of non-normative mothering in the United States. The essayists explore the experiences of women whose reproductive lives do not conform to dominant and consumer-oriented cultural standards when it comes to birth, motherhood, and mothering. These experiences include adoption, surrogacy, foster parenting, giving birth to children with disabilities, and pregnancy loss. In each instance, drawing on extensive field-work and ethnographic analysis, the authors emphasize the various ways in which women adopt the rhetoric of the gift not only to creatively meet the challenges of their experiences, but also to critique consumer culture and redefine the conventional institution of motherhood, the mother/child relationship, and the notion of children as products of biologically or legally determined kinship. The theoretical framework provided by the concept of "the gift" suits the subject matter of some essays better than others.

The collection opens with Judith Modell's polemical essay "Freely Given: Open Adoption and the Rhetoric of the Gift," in which she argues for open adoption over closed adoption. Modell seeks to restore the gift to its classical meaning of "social exchange," and posits a "gift model" of adoption that removes it from the ideology of blood-based kinship. At the time she was writing, the forms of open adoption available in the United States were not contracted and legal. However, according to the Child Welfare Information Gateway of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, as of February 2009, 24 states have legal provisions for enforceable open adoption contact agreements. Given this significant change in legislation, the value of Modell's essay lies primarily in its exploration of the rhetoric of the gift in relation to open adoption practices in general. Rather than "giving up" the child for adoption, which implies surrender, loss, and victimization, the rhetoric of the gift re-conceptualizes the act of the birthmother as a gift to the appreciative and known adoptive parents, and highlights the aspects of generosity and self-sacrifice involved in open adoption. It also implies that recipients remain beholden to the gift giver, which in some cases of open adop-

tion means a long-lasting relationship between the birthmother, her child, and the adoptive parents.

In Modell's essay, the rhetoric of the gift paradoxically humanizes and socializes open adoption, but it also masks the financial side of adoption. Further, it ignores adoptive parents who choose closed adoption and who raise psychologically healthy children, or instances where ongoing contact and openness among the three parties involved may not, for various reasons, be in the best interest of the child.

Helene Ragone's essay, "The Gift of Life: Surrogate Motherhood, Gamete Donation, and Construction of Altruism," on the other hand, explores the paradox between gift giving and monetary compensation, as well as the gendered nature of the gift with respect to women involved in traditional surrogacy (where the surrogate mother contributes an ovum) and gestational surrogacy (where the surrogate mother only "gestates" a couple's baby). Ragone's findings reveal that traditional surrogates are more likely than gestational surrogates to apply the metaphor of the gift to the embryos they carry. All surrogates, however, claim that the payment they receive is insufficient compensation for the service they provide and nine months of pregnancy. For Ragone, this claim illustrates the prevailing belief that "children are gifts and therefore priceless" (70), a view that gives rise to societal disapproval of financially motivated surrogates—a gendered response. In stark contrast, sperm donors, who routinely declare financial compensation as a primary motivation, do not face societal censure.

Danielle Wozniak's essay, "Gifts and Burdens: The Social and Familial Context of Foster Mothering," stands out for its clarity and cogency. Wozniak examines constructions of motherhood, mothering work, and kinship articulated by African American and Euro-American women who foster in the state of Connecticut. The rhetoric of the gift in women's foster narratives subverts dominant notions of foster mothers and foster children as "nonmothers" and "failed children" who do not mirror patriarchal nuclear family life. Here, they become inherently valuable individuals with agency and control. Women who foster embrace a view of themselves as "gifted" mothers who have the talent and strength to foster children; at the same time, they form transformative relationships with, and a new conception of, foster children not as burdens but as gifts, "blessings," and "joys" in themselves. Wozniak's poignant, well-crafted essay shows that foster mothers conceptualize fostering as a true gift-exchange in which mothers and children benefit mutually and equally.

The final two essays, "Does God Give Special Kids to Special Parents: Personhood and the Child with Disabilities as Gift and as Giver" by Gail Landsman, and "True Gifts from God: Motherhood, Sacrifice, and Enrichment in

the Case of Pregnancy Loss" by Linda Layne, deal with children who differ from the norm and thus challenge their mothers' status. Both essays deploy the rhetoric of the gift, used here with explicit Christian overtones, to critique consumerism and self-blame. For Landsman, the idea that God "gives special children to special parents"—embraced by many parents of children with disabilities—is eventually displaced by the assertion that the child is the true giver of the gift, a notion that returns the value of the child to "normal." In the final essay, Layne shows how bereaved mothers use the conceptual and symbolic power of the gift to deal with the moral problem pregnancy loss poses for women in a culture that often understands pregnancy in terms of capitalist production, and the delivery of a healthy child as the result of individual triumph.

Torn: True Stories of Kids, Career & the Conflict of Modern Motherhood

Samatha Parent Walravens.
Seattle, WA: Coffeetown Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Dorsía Smith Silva

Torn: True Stories of Kids, Career, and the Conflict of Modern Motherhood considers various paths of motherhood and whether mothers "can have it all" and at the same time. In many ways, the forty-seven contributors to this volume feel "torn" between caring for their children and the demands of their careers. Drawing on their personal experiences, they explore the guilt women face when they cannot find a balance between motherhood and work. As a result, the narratives emphasize that the "supermommy" complex is dead—the reality of motherhood is that there may not be equilibrium between the worlds of parenting and career.

Most of the tales address this tension with great candour. Liesl Jurock in "Cupcake Crazy," for example, is conflicted when she must miss her son's birthday party at daycare to attend a business meeting. Likewise, Lindsey Mead in "A Foot in Two Worlds" is ambivalent about realigning her professional life to raise her children full time. Jurock and Mead note that their respective career decisions are multilayered and seek to reconcile personal aspirations, educational and financial investments, professional goals, parental responsibilities, and several other factors. Each admits that there is no easy or perfect solution for mothers.

The frankness of some essays is unnerving. In "Confessions of a Crazy