

# Book Reviews

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## Motherhood Memoirs: Mothers Creating/Writing Lives

J. Dymond and N. Willey, eds.  
Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2013.

REVIEWED BY LUCY E. BAILEY

*In creating memoir, we create new ways of understanding our lives.* (17)

Dymond and Willey's edited text, *Motherhood Memoirs*, offers 12 compelling essays that collectively interrogate and expand discourses of motherhood and the genre of memoir as part of a broad critical response to the marginalization of mothers' lives. Mothering stories can offer respite, catharsis and fuel; they can also serve women more broadly as critical sites for their self-representation, community building, and theorizing of "imaginative paths" (76) and "subversive" spaces (108) to work against the biomedical discourses, mind/body dichotomies, and sentimental tropes that too often frame mothers' experiences. This rich resource illustrates maternal narratives as forms of inquiry and knowledge that can "create new ways of understanding our lives" (17).

The editors enact their critical mission in three sections: The Art of Motherhood, What the Other Books Don't Tell Us, and Mothers Without Borders. The first section explores how mothering both nourishes and interrupts artist/writers' creative practices. In Chapter One, Buller considers visual memoirs of motherhood as vehicles for individual, familial, and, ultimately, collective "memory work" (192) while Renfro (Ch.2) gleans strategies from writing guides for mothers that can foster productivity. Jenkins (Ch. 3) analyzes intersections between mothering and writing genres in the work of a 20<sup>th</sup> century female author, noting both the enduring challenges of reconciling mothering with a writing life and the urgency of doing so: "the world

needs mothers and it needs writers, and it needs mothers who are writers, to give voice to this experience that is absolutely central to humankind” (60). In the section’s final chapter, “Ekphrastic Mama,” Greenstone explores artists’ work, including her own, to offer a creative meditation on “motherhood as an intertextual collage between the creative and mundane” (95).

Section two, *What the Books Don’t Tell Us*, turns a critical gaze to the ideological forces that silence aspects of maternal experience. Contributors analyze their own, or other mothers’, narratives of bereavement (Ch. 8), post-partum depression (Ch. 6), labor in nurturing young children (Ch. 5), and autistic children (Ch. 7) that challenge saccharine and medicalized representations of mothering. A particular strength of this section is authors’ balance of close textual analysis with sensitivity to the emotional experiences the texts represent. Douglas’ incisive critique of the biomedical construction of the “unruly” (107) pregnant and mothering body employs her evocative concept of “milkmother” to render visible the embodied labor involved in mothering young children. The sweeping effects of medicalized discourse are similarly visible in memoirs of post-partum depression (Dymond, Ch. 6) which bear traces of women’s “self-imposed silencing” (149) even as they interrupt the culture of shame and misinformation that surrounds PPD (Kearney and Bailey 1). In Chapter 7, Roberts employs Coulter’s “paradigms of disability” to analyze how mothers of autistic children represent and process intimacy and distance, while Fowler explores the “unspeakable” topic of mothers’ mourning and loss as they care for their dying children. These essays speak to the possibilities, and limits, of representing human experience.

The third section, *Mothers Without Borders*, explores material challenges and “controlling images” (Collins) that limit holistic understanding of mothering experiences. In Chapter 9, Johnson recounts how internalizing the mind/body dichotomy endangered her health during pregnancy with a grave medical condition, prompting her “life-changing realization” (196) to resist “fragmentation” and to “live a whole life” (197). The empowering potential of border crossing also emerges in Federer’s analysis (Ch. 10) of blogs as spaces for lesbian co-mothers to nourish mothering identity, preserve individual anonymity, and cultivate community.

In the final chapters, Philyaw and Willey consider how race shapes the production of memoirs, mothering experiences, and conceptions of motherhood, suggesting that the absence of African-American voices in “traditional” mothering accounts reveals white assumptions of “universal” (222) mothering experiences. Philyaw encourages young mothers to cultivate voice in on-line spaces and develop a “mama-writer survival kit” that includes “patience” and “perseverance” (228), while Willey uses African feminist principles to analyze “motherlines” (O’Reilly cited in Willey 238) in texts not commonly recog-

nized as spaces for mothering stories. They highlight historical and contextual forces, including racism and sexism, that shape mothering experiences.

This rich collection demonstrates the value of theorizing autobiographical experiences and narrative from the diverse standpoints of mothering subjects. It also underscores the generative possibilities of diverse genre forms. The text conveys a sense of urgency for readers that producing their own mothering stories can serve as a “fresh revelatory source[s]” (105) for others. Mothering and community are made and remade through the acts of writing, the essays imply, and memoir can serve as a productive site for this labor.

## References

- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Kearney, K. and L. Bailey. “‘We Shoot Our Wounded’: Pregnancy, Mothering and PPD on the Tenure Track.” *Academic Motherhood in a Post-Second Wave Context: Challenges, Strategies and Possibilities*. Eds Lynn O’Brein Hallstein and Andrea O’Reilly. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2012. 74-96.

## Mother of Invention: How Our Mothers Influenced Us as Feminist Academics and Activists

V. Reimer and A. Sahagian, eds.  
Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2013.

REVIEWED BY AISHA KHALIL NASSER

The edited collection by Reimer and Sahagian “seeks to explore the many-varied ways that ... identity markers intersect and shape maternal practice” (6). As such, *Mother of Invention* offers accounts of 16 authors/academics who explore their mothers’ stories, and their varied maternal practices. These authors who recount how their mothers inspired feminist consciousness, whether they personally identified as feminist or not, while some authors also reflect on their own maternal practices. Authors of this collection identified in a variety of ways: lesbian mothers, black mothers, Chicano mothers, Christian mothers, among others.

Reimer and Sahagian start the collection with a poem where Royce recollects with “alarm” her mother’s non-stop house chores. O’Neill (Ch. 1)