

Mothering Mennonite

Rachel Epp Buller and Kerry Fast, eds.
Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2013.

REVIEWED BY ANN HOSTETLER

Mothering Mennonite is an interdisciplinary collection of essays, unique in articulating a discourse of mothering in a religious, ethnic and cultural matrix. Drawing on the contemporary field of Mothering Studies, developed by Andrea O'Reilly and others in the tradition of Adrienne Rich, editors Rachel Epp Buller and Kerry Fast embrace the term "mothering" over "motherhood," since "*motherhood* refers to a patriarchal, oppressive institution while *mothering* reflects female-defined and potentially empowering experiences"(8). In their succinct and helpful introduction, Buller and Fast offer a valuable summary of significant scholarship on Mennonite women in the field of Mennonite studies—highlighting the contributions of Marlene Epp, Magdalene Redekopp, and Rachel Waltner Goosen—and note the relative absence of studies on mothering in the field of Mennonite Studies, which their volume attempts to address. The editors, however, do not attempt to define the term "Mennonite," which can be as readily essentialized as the term "Mother"—but the various iterations of Mennonite community portrayed in the essays, and many of their Mennonite writers, suggest something of the range and diversity of contemporary Mennonites, from sectarian and conservative to cosmopolitan and liberal. Although the essays vary in terms of scholarly and theoretical demands on the reader, many of them invoke personal experience—informed by second wave feminism's belief that "the personal is the political" and the recognition that mothering always takes place in context. The rich variety and particularity of the essays will provoke readers to explore and articulate their own experiences of family life, and their awareness of the crucial role of mothering in reproducing or shaping culture, in new ways.

The volume is organized into four thematic sections. Within each section readers will find a variety of approaches by writers of several generations. The volume opens with the section, "Picturing Mothers and Daughters," and Magdalene Redekop's theoretically layered essay "Picturing My Mother: The Looking Glass Revisited." Representation theory is central to Redekop's thinking—as is resistance to the tendency to essentialize, and thus erase, "the mother." Her essay adds a generational dimension to the scholarly conversation in its reflection on her earlier, path-breaking essay "Through the

Mennonite Looking Glass (1987).” Kirsten Beachy’s lyrical reflection on two different maternal models demonstrates the ways in which daughters choose their own possibilities from the experiences offered to them. The maternal portraits in her essay contrast with the more oppressed and restricted mothers portrayed in Edna Froese’s literary analysis of Darcie Friesen Hossack’s fiction and Di Brandt’s poetry. Mary Ann Loewen articulates the legacy of an intellectually gifted mother constrained but not completely repressed by patriarchal structures.

“Mothering Across Generations,” the second section, includes a wide range of approaches—from a sequence of poems by Connie Braun that articulates the transmission of a Russian Mennonite Heritage to a collaborative study by four Loewen siblings that uses the lens of social identity theory and case study methodology to explore the mothering practices of three women from two generations. The second two sections of the volume look beyond traditional family contexts to include resistances and challenges to traditional constructions of mothering and to consider cultural perspectives on motherhood. The third section, “Challenging Mennonite Motherhood,” focuses on singleness, childlessness, and infertility. Tomomi Naka explores the ways in which experiences and expectations of mothering have shaped the vocations of single women, Becca J. R. Lachman writes of the tensions that result from her commitment to nurture her art and vocation as an artist and Christine E. Crouse-Dyck writes about the ways in which silences around infertility conflict with Mennonites values of mutual support and caring.

The final section, “Mothering in and around Culture(s),” explores cultural influences on mothering from widely different angles, including the influence of scientific parenting on mothering, with an emphasis on the disappearance of the midwife; the role of the 1970s *More-with-Less Cookbook* in shaping Mennonite domesticity as having an effect on theology and praxis; insights into the influence of Evangelicalism on Beachy Amish mothering as both liberating and confining; the role of play in the formation of Old Colony Mennonite Mothering practices. Only the final essay in this section explores Mennonites outside of North America: Jennifer Chappell Deckert considers the mothering of three displaced Columbian women who have found a meaningful relationship with the Mennonite Church in Teusaquillo, Bogotá. Deckert draws on John Paul and Angie Lederach’s formulation of mothering as metaphor for reconciliation as she shares three case studies of mothers who have risen above their traumatized state to both care for their children and advocate for the disappeared and displaced persons who are victims of the ongoing violence. While honoring the particular stories of individuals, Deckert suggests mothering as a metaphor for the work that the church can do in today’s world.

In its ambition to fill the gap between Mothering Studies and Mennonite Studies, *Mothering Mennonite* does not claim to be comprehensive in its approach; however, the varying perspectives of the sixteen essays in this volume serve to sketch out a dialogic and generative response to the subject that invites further inquiry. The editors themselves suggest areas for further studies of mothering, including mothering in the cultural contexts of Africa, Asia and Latin America, where more than 50 percent of contemporary Mennonites reside, the impact of the mission field and relief and development work, and the situation of mothering in the discourses of colonization in the areas where they have resided. I would also suggest that studies of single mothering, LGBTQ parenting, blended families, and adoption would complement these inquiries. Overall, this volume does much to restore a sense of value and meaning to the act of mothering as well as to articulate it as creative and culturally constructive work.

Reproducing Women: Family and Health Work Across Three Generations

Marilyn Porter and Diana L. Gustafson.
Halifax : Fernwood Publishing, 2012.

REVIEWED BY VALERIE HEFFERNAN

Marilyn Porter and Diana L. Gustafson's book *Reproducing Women* presents the results of a qualitative study of how women understand their reproductive lives and how they transmit this understanding within their families and across generational lines. The authors interviewed three generations of women in twenty-four families from the Atlantic province of Newfoundland and Labrador and asked them to tell their stories of the major transitional events—or what they term “relational moments” (14)—in their reproductive lives: menarche, pregnancy and childbirth, mothering, menopause, and ageing. The stories presented in this book reveal how the participants' understanding of what it means to become and be a woman is situated in a strong familial, social, cultural and often religious context. Moreover, the intergenerational relationships between the women mean that their attitudes and experiences undergo a constant process of renegotiation, as the older generations shape the experiences of the generations that follow and the young influence their mothers and grandmothers.