

Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives

Margaret F. Gibson, ed.
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REVIEWED BY CASSANDRA HALL AND TIRAMISU HALL

Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives, edited by Margaret F. Gibson traces how queer theorizations of kinship inform feminist motherhood/mothering studies. In weaving the frameworks and methodologies of queer theory with those of motherhood studies, contributors to this collection posit queerness as practice rather than a thing possessed or ascribed to bodies. Notably, Gibson does not offer a singular, concrete definition of queerness or queer motherhood. Rather, queering motherhood can “start where any of the central gendered, sexual, relational, political, and/or symbolic components of ‘expected’ motherhood are challenged” (6). Gibson neither requires nor expects contributors to agree on a singular idea of “queering motherhood,” instead she embraces the complexities and ambiguities of the concept.

Chapters are grouped into three thematic sections. “Queer Conceptions: Where to Begin?” grapples with how queer embodiment and orientation shapes experiences of conception, pregnancy, birth/becoming parents, and loss. “Queering Practices, Practicing Queers” considers queer parenting/parenting queerly as an everyday meaning-making practice. “Queer Futures? Yearnings, Alliances, and Struggles” expands upon the previous sections as it considers the futures that emerge through queer motherhood/mothering.

Gibson is cognizant of how queer parenting discourses center and assume gay and lesbian parents, often to the detriment of transgender and intersex parents. Following Vivian Namaste, Gibson argues that queer theorists too often celebrate gender transgressions while ignoring transgender experiences of exclusion and violence (11-12). *Queering Motherhood* is attentive to how transmasculine parenting troubles normative gender discourses that undergird theorizations of motherhood and mothering. However, there is a dearth of trans feminine experiences in the collection. In “Transgender Women, Parenting, and Experiences of Ageing,” Damien Riggs and Sujay Kentlyn consider transwomen’s experiences of aging with a focus on lack of familial support and estrangement from their children. While this chapter makes space for lived experiences of hardship, this focus on trans pain, death, and abandonment risks the dangers of the over-telling stories of transwomen’s parenting as inevitably tragic. This highlights the need to expand such work

into the realm of the generative potential of transfeminine mothering, rather than a confined focus on stories of pain and loss.

Barbara Gurr, writing as the heterosexual cisgender mother of a transgirl, explores the need for parents who do not identify as queer to shift their identities as people and parents in order to parent queerly in “Queer Mothering or Mothering Queerly? Motherwork in Transgender Families.” Gurr points out the great need of trans youth to have familial support, and asserts that such support necessitates queer modes of care that do not affirm or assume normativity. As emerges in this chapter, these outcomes might not be classified as good within normative frameworks. In theorizing mothering queerly, Gurr and other contributors trouble the “terms of existing systems that would view ‘normalcy,’ particularly regarding sexuality and gender, as a ‘good outcome’” (3).

For parents whose queerness derives from their queer parenting practices, bringing queer folks into a collective parenting model might also provide needed additional supports. In an interview with Gibson, Gary Kinsmen touches upon this in an exploration of the potential of collective material models of parenting. Kinsmen focuses on the mothering, rather than the motherhood of parenting, in discussing the nurturing and caregiving work of parenting as a queer collective. Kinsmen notes that this carework has the potential to shift ideas of masculinity toward nurturing, as queer men and other types of men join in collective parenting practices that teach care as a strength (254). This intervention hints at the radical possibilities of collective queer parenting in the raising of queer youth, but also in regards to the communal care for aging transwomen mentioned by Riggs and Kentlyn.

When this text came out, a short five years ago, it would have challenged many ideas in undergraduate coursework. With the rapid growth in the fields of queer studies and gender studies, along with the varied methodologies and archives of theory and narrative, this book would work well for activist and academic spaces where considerations of motherhood are taken up. *Queering Motherhood* is of particular use within courses that focus on feminist motherhood studies in that it disrupts a confined imaginary of mother work and its gendered dimensions. Further, the text offers a meaningful contribution to undergraduate queer studies and queer theory courses in that it troubles a queer canon that too often positions parenting as intrinsically normative. Given the ways in which it destabilizes what queerness and mothering are and can be, *Queering Motherhood* is also of use to Reproductive Justice activists and care workers such as doulas and midwives.

As Gibson cautions us, a queer motherhood/mothering cannot emerge from an additive approach wherein bodies coded as queer are included within dominant frameworks that have historically affirmed and assumed cisgender and heterosexual parents. Thus, the prevailing Eurocentrism of the text, named by Gibson in the introduction, marks a significant lapse. Expanding

upon the generative offering of queer motherhood theorized here, how might a deepened attention to race, nation, and (settler) colonial context further disrupt the assumed terms and frameworks of care, kinship, and motherhood? Through an expanded focus on how these formations inform kinship, motherhood, and care, scholars following this anthology's contributors might bring queer mothering into greater relief and reveal care and kinship practices not yet realized in this anthology.

Mothers, Mothering, and Globalization

Dorsía Smith Silva, Laila Malik, and Abigail L. Palko, eds.
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REVIEWED BY CARI SLOAN MAES

In the last few years a number of edited volumes have endeavored to trace the effects of globalization on mothers, mothering, and motherhood across multiple contexts. Maher and Chavkin's, *The Globalization of Motherhood: Deconstructions and Reconstructions of Biology and Care* (Routledge 2010) and Andrea O'Reilly, ed.'s *Mothers, Mothering, and Motherhood Across Cultural Differences: A Reader* (Demeter 2014) stand out as two such publications that bring together distinct voices from across the global "matriscap." These volumes are immensely valuable for teaching diverse perspectives and particularly for disrupting normative and Western-centric archetypes and discourses of mothering. It is worthwhile to ask, then, how Dorsía Smith Silva, et al.'s recent release, *Mothers, Mothering, and Globalization* (Demeter Press 2017) distinguishes itself from these comparator volumes and what nuance it adds to this growing field of inquiry.

As the aforementioned works do, *Mothers, Mothering, and Globalization* focuses on some of the "classic" themes at the nexus of globalization and motherhood, such as migration, global care chains, and negotiations of cultural belonging, family, identity, and maternal praxes. Here, the volume mirrors the dominant impulse among scholars in this field to "confront the complexities and intersectionalities of mothers in the contemporary era of globalization" and the comparative work of identifying critical overlaps, or "bridges across globalization" (4). Yet, the authors also signal a move away from conventional frameworks, calling for the formulation of "new models to

understand the transformative and agentic potential of motherhood in a globalized world” (4). The “new models” they suggest broaden existing analytic paradigms by peering into new sites of experience and representation, such as activist organizations, online spaces, fiction works, and film. In this regard, the volume distinguishes itself from others in the field by illuminating as-yet-uninterrogated stories and voices from the *terra incognita* of global mothering and bringing them into dialogue. To accomplish this, the editors cast a wide disciplinary net in assembling authors this volume, drawing experts from the fields of communication, gender studies, literature, political science, and sociology. In aggregate, their research speaks the exigence to keep pace with the perpetually-expanding terrain of maternal experiences and the homogenizing forces of the global patriarchal order that flatten the category ‘mother.’ The majority of the chapters delve into maternal worlds of the Global South and its diasporas and the profiles of the authors themselves evinces the work’s alignment with the wider transnational feminist activist-academic project. The editors acknowledge, rightly, that academics whose privilege buffers them from the poverty and precarity should “listen carefully” to maternal voices to learn how to respond to the urgent concerns of neoliberal austerity and climate change (xii). The volume would have certainly benefitted from a more robust discussion—perhaps in the introduction or with the addition of a concluding chapter—of the shifting politics of globalization, the implications for mothers, and the methodological and theoretical challenges scholars continue to confront. Here, the work seems to work more as a collection of discrete essays that, while still insightful and quite useful for teaching, lacks an overarching argument. The authors briefly gesture towards the reemergence of nationalism, yet they argue that the longitudinal effects of globalization on mothers and mothering “will not disappear” (11). But readers are left wondering what’s next, why will this type of inquiry remain important, and what is the authors’ vision for this field of scholarship in light of such instability and change? A concluding chapter could have forayed into these concerns and could have underscored some of the key “bridges” forged between the volume’s fourteen chapters. It bears mentioning, as well, that all the chapters, save for a few glimpses of pregnancy and reproduction, focus on *mothering-as-childrearing* and dominant biological and cultural typologies of ‘mother.’ That is, the mothers analyzed here overwhelmingly identify as female, are able-bodied, draw biological connections to their children, and, where sexuality is discussed, are heterosexual. The focus on these particular mothers does not detract from the work’s valuable, cross-cultural exploration of globalization and mothering, but more explicit attention to the pervasiveness of normative experiences and identities across the globe would strengthen the analysis and hint towards new avenues of research.

The first of two sections, “Mothering, Globalization, and Identity,” delves

into the inner sanctum of maternal experience and subjectivity. Here we see the range of disciplinary perspectives on display as the chapters move from cinematic depictions of transnational mothers, to personal narratives of migrant nannies, mom-blogs in diasporic communities, to the place of mothers and mothering in the current global development agenda. Among the most salient themes emerging in this section are the interrogations of virtual “bridges” built by mothers through online interaction. Suchita Sarkar (Chapter 4) and Gavala Maluleke (Chapter 5) reveal how online communities act as mediums through which mothers navigating the pressures and dislocations of globalization forge alliances, preserve culture and language, and resist prescriptive ideas that constrain their mothering. These chapters also show how the tentacles of global capitalism invade these intimate online spaces and attempt to co-opt, monetize, and market maternal thinking and experience. Michelle Hughes Miller (Chapter 7) likewise takes up this theme in her reading of global “women’s empowerment” development discourses. She argues that it is specifically *women as mothers* and *girls as prospective mothers* that development investors hope to enlist and instrumentalize. While other chapters in the volume explore the neoliberal exploitation of ‘motherwork’ and care labor in specific contexts, this chapter offers readers a look at how hegemonic development imperatives synergize these oppressive forces under the guise of gender “empowerment.” Readers will come away from Section One with a sense of how 21st-century mothers have adapted to a world rife with demands and austere with social supports. Most significantly, this section reveals the push and pull mothers feel as they navigate the complex liminal spaces created by globalization and shows the challenges and triumphs of “the doing of mothering” (Maluleke) between cultures and between homelands and diaspora, as well as across borders and across generations.

One of the book’s novel features is an interlude between sections entitled, “At Sea,” in which mother/scholar Jessica Adams ponders mothering adrift as a “small act of globalization” (154). Albeit from a position of acknowledged privilege, Adams narrative exposes how globalization and its modes of displacement create a paradox for mothers who are simultaneously anchored to tradition and compelled to invent something new (154). Section Two, “Mothering, Globalization, and Nation,” tackles a number of complex questions regarding citizenship, migration, resistance, and transnational mothering. The section’s cultural and geographic scope allows readers to envisage some of the “bridges” connecting mothers across the world. For example, we see that mother-activists in Liberia (Chapter 13) and Puerto Rico (Chapter 11) take up strikingly similar forms of (discursive and physical) protest that center and weaponize their bodies, maternal identity, and reproductive labor. Crystal Whetstone’s analysis (Chapter 13), in particular, offers a key counterpoint to the detrimental effects of globalization by

examining how mothers wield its very features—mobility, interconnectivity, and rapid communication—to build transnational movements for change. Two qualitative investigations of mothering across national boundaries add to the metanarrative of Section Two. These chapters ask “what it takes to mother (in) a nation” (193) by analyzing interview data among Filipino migrant mothers in Japan (Celero, Chapter 10) and Zimbabwean mothers living in South Africa (Batisai, Chapter 12). The contexts and perspectives the authors examine offer new angles that complicate the traditional narrative of ‘*South to North*’ and ‘*East to West*’ migration and, as Batisai states, of those “who occupy both the high and low ends of the migration hierarchy” (242). Here, the authors expose occluded aspects of transnational mothering, including, as Batisai observes, the negative repercussions of upward class mobility and the challenges mothers face in understanding their children as reflections of diasporic culture and society (241). The methodological and analytic approaches the authors employ open a promising path for other scholars to explore new pockets of transnational mothering across the Global South. The remaining chapters of the section analyze works of fiction, from Ireland (Chapter 9) and Haiti/New York (Chapter 14) as lenses into the embodied and emotional traumas of reproduction and mothering amidst the oppression and violence wrought by the biopolitical, economic, and imperialist forces of globalization. In analyzing Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and O’Brien’s *Down By the River* (1996), Smith Silva and Palko respectively argue that traumas endured by fictionalized maternal protagonists and their families, in particular sexual assault, mirror the corporal and affective damage of globalization on real mothers and children. Both chapters also give voice to the experiences of children in these contexts, offering yet another angle from which to view the complex interior worlds of global mothers. The pairing of literary and qualitative analyses speaks to the accessibility of this work and its appeal to those teaching undergraduate and graduate courses on mothering.

In returning to the editors’ signal towards the “new models” at the outset of the book, we conclude that our interrogations of mothering within the context of globalization must be dynamic, responsive, and engage multiple categories of analysis and disciplinary perspectives. Without a concluding chapter, however, we, as scholars and teachers, are left to our own devices with this daunting proposal. Ultimately, the book works well as an impressively interdisciplinary set of essays that reveal not only the plurality of mothering experiences in the contemporary moment, but also the ever-evolving spectrum of methodological and theoretical tools scholars have devised to understand them.