

Book Reviews

Inventing Maternity: Politics, Science and Literature, 1650-1865

Susan C. Greenfield and Carol Barash, eds.
Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999

Reviewed by Pamela J. Downe

The eleven essays that constitute this volume present persuasive evidence that our current, increasingly globalized notions of maternity and maternalism actually have their roots in 17th and 18th century social process and popular thought. Specifically, trends in breastfeeding, child custody laws, domestic duty, and various conceptualizations of female physiology are shown to have influenced the shifting and contested terrains of maternity that emerged in Britain and North America between 1650 and 1865. Through analyses of a variety of literary and scientific texts, all the contributors to this volume expertly discuss how these emergent terrains were naturalized so that the strong relationships between mothers and children that came to the fore during this time period, despite evidence to the contrary, are now seen as a timeless characterization of universal motherhood.

The historical excavation of modern maternity presented in this book is perhaps the best I have ever read. The articles are arranged chronologically, beginning with four opening chapters that explore issues of maternal and paternal authority in the seventeenth century. Eve Keller's article, "Making up for Losses: The Workings of Gender in Harvey's *de Generatione animalium*,"

analyzes the scientific accounts of conception offered by William Harvey in 1651 and it offers an interesting interpretation of how the maternal body was seen as the space *against which* the masculinized fetus develops his autonomy. This article—particularly when coupled with Susan Greenfield’s analysis of how ideas of sovereignty collide with contemporary understandings of embryology in John Dryden’s (1682) poem, *Absalom and Achitopai*—presents readers with an insightful and methodologically innovative reading of 17th century scientific thought on maternity, fetal agency, and parental authority. Kimberly Latta’s article on the tensions between secular and religious notions of maternity that emerge in the writings of Anne Bradstreet, and Julia Epstein’s reprinted article on the gendered interpretations of “monstrous births,” round out the introductory section that deconstructs and historicizes debates over parental roles, responsibilities, and regulation.

The remaining seven articles in *Inventing Maternity* build on the momentum and richness of the first four by delving into questions of 18th and early 19th century breastfeeding, male authority and heterosexuality, reproduction, as well as infanticide. Claudia Johnson’s article on Mary Wollstonecraft is particularly interesting as Johnson offers a profound and often overlooked critique of the relationship between compulsory heterosexuality and maternity that can be found in the writings of this feminist icon. Issues of class and nationalism underlie many of these articles as the romantic construction of maternity is unearthed and the bias towards the economically privileged and the colonizing nations is revealed. Toni Bowers brings issues of class to the fore in particularly telling ways in her study of the representations of mothering and women’s domestic responsibilities that appear throughout Samuel Richardson’s (1741) *Pamela, Part 2*, while Mary Chapman’s article on the supposed instances of infanticide of White children at the hands of Native Americans in James Cooper’s (1826) *The Last of the Mohicans* deals effectively with the ramifications of British colonialism. The emergence of a Malthusian nationalism that relied on a particular view of reproduction-as-duty-and-destiny is dealt with most effectively by Anita Levy in her chapter on “Reproductive Urges: Literacy, Sexuality, and Eighteenth Century Englishness.” Here, Levy examines how language used to describe reproduction, maternity, and population growth—and the related language describing the spread of literacy—reflects the overriding societal concern in eighteenth-century England with unauthorized and uncontrolled replication and growth within national borders.

It is extremely difficult to capture and convey the complex richness of this volume. Taken together, the constitutive essays offer a historical analysis of the making of modern maternity that is sure to appeal to a wide variety of readers, though I believe the volume is primarily intended for academics. Susan Greenfield’s introduction is remarkably thorough, offering enough context and commentary to wet readers’ appetites without becoming redundant. The only drawback is an over reliance on English texts. Although three essays deal specifically with American and Irish material, the volume restricts itself by not

dealing with a broader array of scientific thought, literature, folklore, and song. Otherwise, *Inventing Maternity* is a thought provoking and extremely important volume that will have a significant impact across academic disciplines.

House of Mirrors: Performing Autobiograph(ically) in Language/ Education

Renee Norman
New York: Peter Lang, 2001

Reviewed by Dorothy Agnes Lander

It's hard to find an alias for "my mother" (199).

This line is embedded in Renee Norman's "bricolage" – a mother/daughter story that incorporates and transforms the autobiography of her teenaged daughter, Sara. The epigrammatic phrase anticipates the parenthetical "m(other)" who is constitutive of Norman's "autobiography in/as re-search" (10). Norman performs autobiograph(ically) through poetry, personal essays, memoirs, and examines her own subject positions—writer, m(other), teacher, scholar, Jew—as interwoven with the autobiographical texts of others. As a mother-writer, she states emphatically, "I am to this day stuck on writing about mothering as I mother while I write....The mother life looms largest and is writ in the writing" (18).

The primary organizing metaphor of Norman's book, the house of mirrors, is joined with the m(other)ing metaphor. The author introduces these metaphors in her opening chapter, and I accepted her invitation to enter another side of the mirror, to "speculate in mirrors as you look at m(others)" (23). As a "not-mother"—Norman uses Brandt's hyphenated category throughout her book—I perform autobiographical research in/as activist mothering and engage in personal speculating on performative instances of othering not-mother-writers. Norman's autobiographical writing, replete with fractured words such as "m(other)," singles out mothers and mother-writers who are not always taken seriously. Norman discusses the co-emergence of autobiography and mother-writings as "a burgeoning field in education" (19) and she maps the connections between autobiography and mother-writings.

The "contradictions between what [Norman] intends and constructs" (21) is felt, however, in her valorizing of mothers and mother-writers over not-