

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-

mothers as autobiographical writers. The juxtaposition of rooms and mirrors in the works of Doris Lessing (as a mother-writer) and Hannah Arendt (as a not-mother writer) is a performative instance of m(othering). The category of “not-mother” defines writers in terms of what they are not, however, and echoes phallogocentric writing in which women are constituted in Lacanian terms of insufficiency.

In her opening essay “Genesis,” Norman introduces Ursula LeGuin and Helen Weinzweig who began to write after their children were born and raised. The bricolage that Norman performs with Doris Lessing’s autobiographical fiction in the *Martha Quest* books emerges from her attraction to Lessing as a mother-writer and shapes the section of the book entitled “Martha-and-I-in-Mirrors.” As she “entered Martha, inhabiting her like a spirit for a series of poems” (86), the reflections of the many not-mother-writers who shape Norman’s theorizing—most notably Ted Aoki and Carl Leggo—fade out of focus. Still, she ably performs the bricolage of reading and writing mothers and allows not-mothers to “enter the contested territory of what it means to (be) mother” (183). But Norman challenges the anti-autobiographical positions of not-mother writers, particularly Hannah Arendt, and I was left with the impression that maternity, “the most important and transforming experience” (184) of Norman’s life, must leave not-mother-writers bereft of experiences that qualify as “transformative.”

Compare Norman’s bricolage layered onto the correspondence between friends Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, with her subsequent musings on childlessness and its effect on Arendt’s philosophical positions. In a lyrical poem entitled “Hannah’s Child,” Norman suggests that Arendt’s childlessness is manifest in her lack of feminist thought: Arendt “did not know the interruption and plurality of motherhood. That may account for Hannah’s strict division between the public and the private” (177). In Norman’s account, writing friends seem less likely than writing mothers to experience transformation or to generate feminist thought.

From my position as not-mother, I entered each of Norman’s rooms to speculate on m(others) and I wish to revisit these rooms for particular themes and writers/re-searchers who enrich her autobiographical performance. Her bibliography is an excellent resource for further work on autobiography and language/education. Unfortunately, the book lacks an index that would facilitate browsing in the house of mirrors.