

Motherhood Online

Michelle Moravec, ed.

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Reviewed by Alison Quaggin Harkin

In her preface to *Motherhood Online*, a collection of essays on the experiences of motherhood in a virtual environment, editor Michelle Moravec explains that the book “explores the thousands of mommy groups that populate the web,” whether these are “centered on region, religion, race, or some other aspect of identity” (x). The contributors, too, are from diverse world regions and disciplines, including communications, history, sociology, anthropology, English, psychology, and medicine. The topics addressed are varied: expectant motherhood, group support and conflict, teen motherhood, mothering children with special needs or rare medical conditions, myths of motherhood, fathers’ participation in online communities, assisted pregnancy and surrogate motherhood, adoption, child-rearing practices, and transnational issues. At the same time, the underlying themes of community support and the ways

in which experience is created, recreated, co-created, and narrated give this volume a satisfying cohesiveness. The book shows how mothers (and others) in virtual communities, as in “real” life, tend to structure reality “in the form of stories and narratives that they tell others and themselves” (Peter Buzzi and Claudia Megele 233). Contributor Barbara L. Ley, for example, discusses how mobile devices, social networking sites, and blogs have changed online communication, but she stresses that the ability to participate in storytelling remains key.

The book is divided into three general sections: Theoretical Perspectives, Case Studies, and Blogs and Community. The first section provides a theory-grounded discussion of the kinds of support and communities women may find on “mommy sites,” how these may change as communication technologies expand, and how women adapt to such change. For instance, Lorin Basden Arnold examines how the theory of relational dialectics can be applied to an examination of online communities, as these allow users to experience temporal distance and autonomy, along with diversity, varied points of view, and a sense of connection with others. Two other essays, one by Michelle Moravec and another by Patricia Drentea and Jennifer Moren Cross, focus on the challenges of sustaining a sense of community online when groups of users expand or evolve. Similarly, Sarah Leavitt offers a thorough discussion of how the “hard work of disagreeing” in online communities may, in fact, lead to deeper bonds among participants (69).

In the second section, Case Studies, authors examine specific types of online resources and communities related to mothering and/or parenting. While all the essays provide valuable insights into online experiences, readers are likely to turn first to those dealing with issues most immediately relevant to them. As the mother of a child with autism, I was drawn to Denise Barnum Burgess’s “Closing the Refrigerator: Maternal Empowerment and the MySpace Autie Mommies,” in which she explains the ways in which “autie moms” may accept dominant narratives of “heroic” mothers who have “a singular focus on using power for their children alone rather than using power to bolster their own status as well” (122). I was cheered by Burgess’s point that women may, tentatively, also work toward a more gynocentric vision of motherhood through their narratives and participation in online groups.

Other essays in this section include Jenna Vinson’s insightful exploration of young mothers’ narratives that subvert and challenge “expert” opinions and stories on teen motherhood, and Liesbeth Wiering’s discussion of the ways in which a virtual environment can provide a community for parents of children with a rare medical condition. Several other contributors examine gendered differences and similarities in parents’ use of online communities and resources (Ellen Brady; Curtis B. Livesay), as well as sites focused on assisted

reproduction issues (Venetia Kantsa; Michelle McGowan) or adoption (Peter Buzzi and Claudia Megele; Todd Lindley).

In the final section, *Blogs and Community*, Lynne M. Webb and Brittney S. Lee's opening essay provides a general overview of blogging and introduces the ways in which blogging can create and maintain supportive communities among mothers. Other authors focus on blogs for specific groups of mothers: Marceline Thompson-Hayes discusses mothers of autistic children and how they use blogging to form supportive communities, while Yahui Zhang provides insight into how Chinese women's blogging can influence their mothering practices and permit them to reflect "on their relational self not only as mothers, but also as wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, career women, and friends" (275).

The closing essay, "Transnational Surrogacy, E-Motherhood, and Nation Building" by Sayantani Dasgupta and Shamita Das Dasgupta, I found particularly thought-provoking and troubling, as it not only details the potential benefits of online communities centred on mothering and/or parenting, but their limits and possibly negative aspects. The authors provide specific examples as they explain that, while bonds and relationships certainly may form among Western intended parents (IPs) who use blogging sites about Indian surrogacy, some IPs also tend to practice "othering" of Indian surrogates. The authors found, for instance, that several photos on blogging sites depicted pregnant "belly shots" of anonymous, faceless surrogates. While remaining sensitive toward IPs and their desire to become parents, the authors conclude that "online motherhood by surrogacy is creating spaces for support and community while simultaneously reinforcing imperialist patterns of colonialism and commercialism" (303).

Motherhood Online contributors' ability to address a variety of complex issues critically and thoroughly makes this text helpful for anyone who wishes to learn about the many ways of experiencing motherhood—and oneself—in a virtual environment. Although the world of online interaction will continue to change as technology advances, the book's focus on the human desire to communicate, share narratives, and form communities in an online world means it is likely to remain relevant for years to come.