

Everyday World-making: Toward an Understanding of Affect and Mothering

Julia Lane and Eleonora Joensuu, eds.
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REVIEWED BY RACHEL EPP BULLER

This new edited collection from Demeter Press opens with some guiding questions: What can we understand about mothering through the lens of affect, and vice versa? And, what happens to our (understanding of) mothering when we address its affective dimensions and potentials?

Mothering studies and the study of affect are each growing fields of interest, but this book brings the two together by foregrounding “the ordinary and the everyday as significant research sites for considering both affect and mothering” (6). The editors argue that mothering is often dismissed and depoliticized because of this ordinariness, but that the lens of affect – studying the capacity to affect and be affected – offers a productive way into the ordinary, framing it not as something easily dismissed but rather as a mode of world-making. “Affect theory provides tools to make sense of [the] affective intensities [of mothering] as they move between bodies, and between bodies and environments” (5).

As the first volume of its kind to investigate the overlaps and intersections of affect and the maternal, the book benefits from an experimental spirit. The editors note that many of the contributors were new to either affect theory or maternal studies, or both, and so the essays are “essays’ in their truest form – trying out certain ideas and considering intersections perhaps for the first time. The editors divide the book into three sections: “Becoming and Performing Mother,” in which contributors explore affective, relational, experiences of mothering as well as performative writing; “Mothering and the Potentials of Dark Affect,” addressing topics such as ambivalence and child loss, the “dark affects” of mothering that make us profoundly uncomfortable; and “Manoeuvring the Boundaries of ‘Mother,’” in which writers move beyond topics of pregnancy and birth and into expanded forms of relationality.

The format of the volume departs from that of many edited collections. In addition to the standard introduction, the editors also write mini-introductions to each of the three sections, helpfully framing the contributions and providing theoretical continuity throughout the book. The editors return frequently to ideas from the writings of Sara Ahmed, Lisa Baraitser, Brian Massumi, and *The Affect Theory Reader* edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, continually putting feminist, maternal, and affective voices in conversation

and reminding the reader of their intentional multidisciplinary lens. Alongside the to-be-expected scholarly investigations, many of which incorporate autoethnographic methodologies, the book also includes poetry—Kari Marken’s poem ‘fail,’ seeking to rewrite the cultural script about divorced mothers, is a particularly welcome addition – as well as “Sisterly Conversations,” informal discussions conducted by each of the editors with their family members. While these conversations offer an in-the-moment quality to readers, they could be edited significantly to remove filler remarks and present greater focus.

The transdisciplinary nature of the book is sure to include topics of interest to a wide variety of readers. Brenda Benaglia explores the distinctive affective and relational space created by doulas. Sandra Faulkner performs a fascinating cost-benefit analysis of her own pregnancy as way to investigate maternal ambivalence. For this reviewer’s interests, one of the most engaging pieces of the collection is Justyna Wierzchowska’s “Empty Maternal” essay, an analysis of artist Marina Abramovic’s performance *The Artist is Present*. In a surprising and innovative reading of the piece, Wierzchowska argues that Abramovic sets up an affective encounter with her audience that appears to offer them the promise of being cared for. Audience members’ emotional responses, she suggests, are informed by a collectively repressed desire to be mothered. Rather than fulfilling their desires, however, Abramovic offers only an empty maternal, a simulation of nurturing that makes clear the illusory nature of the affective encounter.

No single volume ever covers the full range of possible topics, and the editors readily acknowledge areas still to be explored. Perhaps because the affective intensities of the pregnancy, birth, and early mothering periods are particularly acute, the essays heavily emphasize those time periods, with little attention given to later stages of maternal experience. But the larger project set forth in the book, putting affect theory and maternal studies into conversation, is a worthy beginning and lays the groundwork for further explorations.