

and the impact of unrealistic western ideals about “good mothers” on mothers and children alike. Taken together, the essays investigate a number of reasons why women live apart from their biological children, including health problems, the intervention of social agencies, missionary zeal, women’s competing needs, and difficult life circumstances. Most of the mothers studied are contemporary women, but two fascinating essays (one on seventeenth-century Quaker mothers and another on early twentieth-century Canadian mothers), consider two very different contexts in which women live apart from their children.

The essays point to the burden placed on both women and their children by the expectation that mothers and fathers will have different kinds of relationships with their children, and that a child’s closest relationship will always be with his or her mother. As a result, children who are raised by other adults, but who have ongoing contact with their nonresidential mothers, feel stigmatized. Even when their mothers have made careful arrangements for their care and continue to be in contact with them, a gap exists between their experiences and ideals for relationships between mothers and children. At the same time, mothers often face harsh social sanctions and disapproval from acquaintances, as well as from those closest to them.

Many of the essays contest the sharp distinction between “good” and “bad” mothers, which typically operates in the societies studied in this book (Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States). They gesture toward a balanced rethinking of what it means to be a “good mother.” Further theorizing about non-residential mothering is necessary, and any such work would do well to start with the rich theoretical and experiential material presented in Gustafson’s collection.

In Search of Shelter: Subjectivity and Spaces of Loss in the Fiction of Paule Constant

Margot Miller
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Reviewed by Marla H. Kohlman

Margot Miller’s avowed purpose in writing *In Search of Shelter* is to “bring critical attention in the English-speaking world to the work of Paule Constant, an award winning and decidedly disturbing author” (9). Constant’s collected works, Miller argues, are particularly important to scholars of postcolonial studies because they give voice to the complicity and struggle located in interpersonal relationships, and in the historical effects of having been either

colonizer or colonized at the macro-level of national identity.

Miller utilizes psychological theory to explain the importance to Constant of seeking safety and shelter within relationships governed by oppression and submission. As she argues, “Constant at once insists on the value of the female and of female characters as representations of the struggle for human connection” (132). Constant’s work exemplifies the belief that writing is at once a volitional act and one that bears the mark of institutional influence. In challenging discourse and giving voice to the oppressed, writing has the subversive potential of undermining current ideological narratives. But when it is regulated by institutions that often are organized systems of oppression, writing can also be repressive.

Miller’s discussion draws on the work of Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, and Julia Kristeva. She exposes the agency of women who face dilemmas that either exacerbate their victimization or allow them to extricate themselves from their submissive positions. Miller argues, in fact, that “[l]ike many contemporary French and Francophone writers who expose violent situations both to denounce them and to reclaim their voice/existence, Constant creates in her fictional world a profound sense of the psychological exile matched by its geographical counterpart that her characters experience” (153). Time and again, Constant’s fictional characters are required to suffer devastating losses because of the choices they make within their constrained circumstances, even as they hope to find fulfillment in relationships with others. Miller characterizes this dilemma as “the fundamental problem of individual responsibility in the face of oppression” (148). In fact, much of Miller’s work is devoted to plot summary in support of her argument that “Constant’s novels show us that because of these ‘choices’ the role of individual and social responsibility in personal loss transcends such specific political questions as race, gender, religion, or ethnicity” (151). When she provides painstaking plot summaries of Constant’s fictional texts, however, Miller becomes pedantic.

Written from a feminist perspective, *In Search of Shelter* is an important contribution to postcolonial studies. Miller recognizes that Constant’s depiction of fictional characters is not feminist; she argues instead that Constant’s gendered institutions, shaped by cultural contexts, both grant and deny agency to individuals. Miller’s book is particularly valuable for its explication of Constant’s narratives that concern themselves with the representation of male and female characters who seek shelter in the very relationships that make them complicit in their own oppression.