

Rachel Epp Buller and Kerry Fast, eds. *Mothering Mennonite*. Toronto: Demeter, 2013. 312 pages.

M*othering Mennonite* offers an eclectic and wide range of mother stories, research essays and poems, set in various Mennonite communities in the Americas, by emerging, established and retired writers, poets and scholars, in a range of disciplines, from Canada, the United States, Japan and South America. I would have liked a more concisely and coherently theorized approach to this important topic on the part of the editors, more disciplinary rigor in its presentation of such wide ranging material, including an index and more accurate citation of intertexts, a clearer sense of intended readership, and more acknowledgement of the extensive recent scholarship in the area of maternal studies that made this collection possible, which could have helped to focus its vision and social edge. Adrienne Rich and Andrea O'Reilly are briefly mentioned, but where are Marianne Hirsch, Mary O'Brien, Paula Gunn Allen, and Luce Irigaray, whose important theorizing helped bring what O'Brien called "reproductive consciousness" to public discourse in ways that are highly relevant here?

That being said, there is something provocative and lively about a collection which allows itself to proceed in any direction, using any approach to the topic of mothering in the Mennonite community, in any style or genre, collecting valuable primary material along the way—much the way women’s domestic conversation tends to digress in all directions, accommodating the numerous interruptions to its flow by children and laundry and meals with a certain grace and ease. And it is delightful to see the wide range of topics coming out of maternal studies into a unique collection like this one. Judiciously chosen photographs add to the eclectic feel of the collection and certainly enhance reader interest. In this way, the collection as a whole functions much like the traditional family photo album, theorized by Montreal art critic Martha Langford as a textual artifact intended to be read and appreciated in the context of a sprawling, meandering, multivocal oral culture.

The collection contains numerous insights, and the range of engagements and the local communities they highlight, with their numerous differences, is impressive—though a clearer editorial overview of the different groups and regions and sects represented, and how they are meaningfully related to each other in the present time, if at all, would have been useful in helping to articulate the parameters and purpose of the collection. I was particularly interested in law student Tracey Leigh Dowdeswell’s portraits of traditional Mennonite midwives in early Canada, their training and practices, sense of professionalism and courage, and frequent brush-ins with modern medicine and the law. Other highlights include literary critic Magdalene Redekop’s lively (and smartly theorized) personal essay, “Picturing My Mother,” in which she parses out inherited photo images of her mother and their vivid subtle messages about the life and character of her mother, in dialogue with Langford’s picture theory on the family photo album; “Who’s Cooking the Borscht?,” a sociological study of the dizzying challenges of motherwork across several generations of Mennonite women by William Loewen, Gladys Loewen, Sharon Loewen Shepherd, and DJ Pauls; and folklorist Doreen Helen Klassen’s excellent, sensitively elucidated study of traditional Mennonite girl children’s play, and its implications for social role formation as resourceful and nurturing women and mothers in a traditionalist Mennonite community

Several interesting pieces reflect aspects of traditionalist and gradually modernizing village life, including Kirsten Eve Beachy’s meditation on milking cows, Wendy A. Crocker’s essay on home schooling, Tomomi Naka’s observations on “Singlehood in a Conservative Mennonite Community,” and Cory Anderson’s carefully modulated essay on the requisite submission of women to their husbands in the Beachy-Amish community. Altogether, there is a commendable honoring of motherwork, so often

underrated in public discourse. Becca J. R. Lachman, in “Creative (M)othering,” makes the salient point that other forms of cultural labor than biological mothering, such as art-making and teaching, should also be considered “maternal.” Here some knowledge of the extensive theorizing of biological, adoptive, and symbolic mothering published in the past several decades in North America and Europe would have been specifically useful. (We shouldn’t have to keep re-inventing all our terms in every generation. We could benefit greatly from more intergenerational solidarity and greater appreciation of the “symbolic mothering” that has gone before us, so salient to women’s lives, and to the understanding of women’s roles in human reproduction and the creation of culture and history.)

More politically, Edna Froese offers a lyrical and courageous essay on the suppressed, hidden, and shadow sides of maternal Mennonite identity, empathetically refusing the kinds of nostalgia or glossing over of problems in the community by which Mennonites are often tempted (including some Mennonite scholars). Here is the moving final paragraph of her essay:

Not until I was an adult and a mother myself could I begin to know how difficult it was to mother without inadvertently, with the best of intentions to do otherwise, repeating old patterns. My mother’s stories of her own mother’s indifference—too busy with too many children—and her older sisters’ resentment of having to care for yet another sibling have often come to mind. I know now both what inadequacy and depression feel like and what their sources are, now when it is far too late to tell her, genuinely for once, that it’s alright, and ... could we dance? (italics in the original)

Other than Magdalene Redekop and Edna Froese’s energetic protests against the patriarchal cultural norms that kept their mothers from full creative expression of their subjectivity and sociality, the collection addresses the political aspects of maternal experience within the community only obliquely. Christine E. Crouse-Dick’s essay on the pangs of infertility and the exacerbation of those pangs by a community insensitive to deviations from standard family norms reaches for alternatives to patriarchal thinking about women’s social role and self-understanding. At the same time, the author upholds conventional masculinist definitions of Anabaptist values, citing Harold Bender and Harry Huebner, but none of the gender-conscious women (and also men) authors and activists who have worked so hard to create alternative social networks and understandings that could address her plight more helpfully. The conclusion of the essay is therefore a more helpless cry than it need be, at least in the contemporary North American context where this revisionary literature and the social, legal, and alternative medical benefits it has engendered is widely available: “We as a

community don't know *what* to do, but we need to do *something*. We need acknowledgement of such situations and others." (Have she and her husband tried Chinese acupuncture? Traditional indigenous herbs? Massage therapy? Counselling? There are many treatment options available in their situation now, some with very high success rates in addressing infertility itself, others with high success rates in addressing the emotional and psychological aspects of the situation. It is no longer necessary to suffer this experience so bereft of consolation as seems to be the case here. How will the church as a community change its views on these matters if the people most directly affected by them don't take the initiative to enact such change themselves?)

Given the lack of political analysis of Mennonite gender politics in the collection generally, I was interested to discover an essay at the end titled "From Persecution to Hope: Mennonite Mothering in a Context of Violence," by transnational MCC worker and political mediator Jennifer Chappell Deckert. The essay does not address issues of domestic abuse or oppression of mothers in Mennonite patriarchy as I had anticipated, however. It is a moving meditation, set in war torn Colombia, which ends with this eloquent statement by a woman who has come to the Mennonite church in Bogota for assistance after experiencing trauma and displacement:

The bravest and best thing you can do for me is to sit here in front of me and listen . . . to let me release some of my sorrow, some of my pain . . . to take some of the weight and carry it for me. When I came to the church and you looked me in the eyes and said *Bienvenida*, I knew I could feel safe here. I knew I was home.

It's an inspiring way to end the collection, and yet I can't help reflecting on how impressively Mennonites enact "peace and justice" and "reconciliation" processes among oppressed people far away and yet how rarely serious issues of domestic violence and abuse toward women and children are tended to within most (still heavily male-dominated) Mennonite communities. Even, regrettably, how often Mennonite exemplary international (and safely distant) relief work is used as a smokescreen or cover to deflect attention from ethical lapses and failures at home. Domestic violence and the oppression of women among Mennonites has been very much in the international news the past few years, and it is a serious oversight and omission for this collection not to have addressed the issues of patriarchy and its ongoing perpetuation through still pervasive violence against children, humiliation of the feminine, and continued disenfranchisement of the maternal in the culture.

Imagine what it would be like for domestically oppressed Mennonite women and mothers to find solidarity and hope among fellow Mennonites

the way this woman did in Colombia, instead of facing stony silence and bitter censure, as is so very often the case in Mennonite communities. Imagine Christine Crouse-Dick finding the kind of support and empathy she craves for her struggle with infertility and self-image from fellow church members instead of insensitive jokes and turning away. Imagine international bestselling novelist Miriam Toews, to give a famous example, assuming the position of honor among Mennonites she surely deserves for her skillful and courageous writing about the silencing, scapegoating, and vilification of women in the community, instead of being viciously censored, as she so often is, by her own people. Or simply omitted from view, as she is here. It is not a matter of “not knowing *what* to do.” We live in an extraordinarily privileged historical moment, surrounded by the most thorough, insightful feminist, inter-culturally inflected scholarship ever written on the subject of mothering, which has influenced many positive changes in family, social law, and medical practice, and created unprecedented access to positions of influence for women of all colors and affiliations and beliefs (in North America at least). In this context, Mennonites need to reach out and gratefully get with the changes, or be left stuck in outmoded—and increasingly regressive—models of community making instead.

Finally, I would have liked to see more of the “blood and guts” aspect of mothering reflected in this anthology, including the experience of childbirth itself. I am thinking of the feisty heroic knowledge of the Mennonite women interviewed by Katherine Martens in the early ’90s, for example, who understood, on a deep level, the unique power of their role as the bearers of the human species and mothers of the culture. They spoke with pride about their many grisly childbirth and childrearing ordeals, which typically gave them a new sense of their power and importance as women. They were eloquent in articulating their unique knowledge as the bearers of the species, and spoke with awe and gratitude about the grand cosmological and faith implications of this power and responsibility, of bearing and nurturing new life, new hope, new creation into being in the world in every generation (*In Her Own Voice: Childbirth Stories From Mennonite Women*, ed. Katherine Martens and Heidi Harms, University of Manitoba Press, 1997). That kind of direct voice of the mothers themselves, and the political and theological implications of mothering as radical existential and philosophical act, and the unique contribution Mennonites might make to this important topic call out for more profound representation and exploration here.

Di Brandt wrote the first literary dissertation on maternal narrative in a Canadian university, later published as the influential monograph, Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature (1993), which

included a chapter on the Mennonite childbirth stories collected by Katharine Martens. Her most recent poetry collection is Walking to Mojácar (2011), with translations into French and Spanish by Charles LeBlanc and Ari Belathar, and her own trans(e)lations of traditional German Mennonite hymns and Plautdietsche folktales in the contemporary Canadian context.

