

Catherine Bodendorfer Garner

Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood, edited by Linda Rose Ennis (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2014), 343pp., ISBN: 1927335906, \$25.82 Paperback.

The Myth of Choice in Intensive Mothering

Few mothers have ever thought of the labor associated with mothering as easy work, but mothers have been challenged in different ways according to their position in time and place. Wars, famine, colonization, the power of political parties, the economy, technology, and culture are but a few of the forces that shape the ways that women care for children. In 1976, Adrienne Rich opened the door for much of the current research and criticism within the field of maternal studies when she differentiated between the womanly *acts* of mothering and the patriarchal *institution* of motherhood in *Of Woman Born*. Linda Rose Ennis' anthology *Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood* builds on Rich's differentiation and many essays within it trouble the ways that mothers are encouraged to devote an unnecessary degree of labor and an unrealistic (for many) amount of money to mothering while simultaneously being subjected to increased scrutiny and the feeling that they are competing against women who could be a source of support rather than judgment.

Nearly every essay in this collection specifically quotes Sharon Hays' *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, which was published in 1996 and is often credited with identifying and defining the term 'intensive mothering' while this shift itself was still in its infancy. In broad strokes, this term addresses the amplifying cultural demands that prod mothers to dedicate inordinate amounts of time, money, and labor into their child[ren] in order to not only guarantee that they thrive but also outperform peers. While the continual citing of her definition seems unnecessary at times, this permits each article to stand independently and further accentuates the ways in which intensive mothering has become even *more* intense, for lack of a better word, while also highlighting the ways in which some aspects of this trend have deviated from where it was two decades ago.

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Ennis, who edited *Intensive Mothering*, claims her goal for the anthology is to explore whether the ‘unselfish nurturance of intensive mothering is a form of self-interested gain and how it is related to the economic needs of a patriarchal society’ (p. 2). Ennis has succeeded in acquiring essays that highlight the ways in which culture shapes the experience of mothering while analyzing the ways in which this experience has dovetailed with political and economic shifts in the global North, namely neoliberalism. The essays, however, never take the shape of the occasionally dry prose of political science and instead showcase the authors’ passion for their personally informed, thoughtful research. While Ennis claims that her effort is led primarily by a desire to understand women’s motivations -- an effort to which she stays true - - it should be noted that like many feminist tomes on this subject, the authors within this anthology are generally critical of the demands intensive mothering places on women in the global North as well as the ways in which this cultural phenomenon goes largely unchecked.

Comprised of three sections, the anthology’s first section, which consumes just over half of the book, presents several essays that specifically address the fallout neoliberalism has had on the practice of mothering. Authors draw attention to the cultural marketing of hyperindividuality (i.e., little government or community support for mothers) as well as the ways in which children are increasingly viewed as social capital in which to both invest and garner dividends. The second section of the anthology assesses current aspects of intensive mothering; capitalism and the rampant consumerism associated with baby paraphernalia, education, and childcare; increasing mother/child bond via baby sign language, attachment mothering, and the practice of elimination communication; and the resistance poor mothers face by state agencies to perform intensive mothering. The third and final section examines the future viability of this philosophy and the drawbacks of this method of mothering. Beyond the sectional headings that Ennis uses to demarcate the themes of the essays, an additional motif that runs through this collection concerns the issue of choice, or as Ennis states: ‘the myth of choice’ (p. 2). In contemporary politics the word ‘choice’ is often a polemical one that is conflated with reproductive rights; however, there are many other choices that women, and more specifically mothers, make in regard paid labor, pregnancy and delivery, nursing, discipline, nutrition, and a plethora of other acts, most of which, according to this anthology, are landmines women transgress with varying degrees of awareness to the stigma associated with the ‘wrong’ performance of mothering. Ennis and the authors in *Intensive Mothering* rightly question the degree of choice that is involved in these decisions since

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one's class, race, community, access to education, religion, physical ability, and so on are all part of the landscape. Many of the anthology's authors struggle with the degree to which women have the opportunity to reject the underlying philosophy of intensive mothering without being subject to personal and social shaming. Indeed, as Ennis correctly points out, for most women who subscribe to the arduous demands of intensive mothering there must be some internal payoff. In the introduction, Ennis suggests one motivation women have to participate in intensive mothering may be to experience relief from the guilt of being a bad mother. Authors throughout the anthology offer additional insight, much of which does not contradict this assertion but likely works in tandem with it to create formidable pressure on modern mothers.

On a related point, one of the many strengths of this collection is the consistent incorporation of intersectionality as a framework for understanding the multiple forces that shape motherhood. While intensive mothering is often associated with white women of material means who do not participate in the formal labor market, the authors challenge the relatively subtle ways that intensive mothering can shape the philosophy and performance of mothering of those who can and do participate in this form of mothering; those who conscientiously work against these practices; as well as those women who, for various reasons, are unable to forfeit the primary output, namely time and money, that this type of mothering demands. Ennis' collection, with its focus on neoliberalism, asserts that class is at the heart of intensive mothering, and for most individuals, race can and does intersect with class in complex ways. It is a credit to the collection that essays that are not designed to specifically focus on issues of class or race still frequently highlight the ways that these markers may influence the theory that is being asserted.

The essays in *Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood*, which are strongly grounded in feminist and cultural theory as well as sociology and psychology (but do not incorporate literary studies, art criticism, or historical analysis), would be a useful addition to any university library, and that is likely its intended placement. However, I would argue while all the authors are academics, the breadth, tone, and relevance of most of the works in this anthology allows it to extend beyond the academy and remain accessible to those who may not be formally trained in this area of scholarship. Pulling authors from several countries (albeit all in the global North), the voices Ennis has curated confirm that intensive mothering is not a phenomenon exclusive to the U.S., but that its reach, due in part

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to the adoption of neoliberalism throughout the global North, transgresses geographic boundaries, class, race, age, and even gender.

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