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BOOKS AND EXHIBITION REVIEW**Review of *Mothering Mennonite***

Mothering Mennonite, by Rachel Epp Buller and Kerry Fast (Eds.), Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 312 pages, \$34.95, Paperback, 2013, ISBN: 9781927335123

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Rachel Epp Buller and Kerry Fast's *Mothering Mennonite*, a collection of essays, creative writing, and poetry offers a probing look at the intersections between religion, identity, and the maternal. It persuasively argues that mothers and mothering are central to the formation and distillation of Mennonite culture, and that the figure(s) of the Mennonite mother and the act(s) of Mennonite mothering are rich and diverse. While acknowledging that certain proscriptive doctrines and patriarchal traditions have worked to shape mothers in the faith, the authors readily recognize that Mennonite women 'have always been mothers in situational contexts' and that mothering 'has, in Mennonite history, been a dynamic process of transmitting and determining cultural, religious and ethnic identity' (5). Indeed, the contributors to the volume eschew the inscription of an essentialized ideal of the Mennonite mother or mothering practice and acknowledge the various historical, geographical, and personal circumstances that shape their identities and activities, as well as the reality of pluralistic and dynamic Mennonite cultures. As the fourteen essays in this compendium make clear, there are myriad ways in which to mother as a modern-day Mennonite.

Mothering Mennonite is a pioneering volume in that it is 'the first book to incorporate religious groundings in interpretations of motherhood' (9). In its ambitious and thorough introductory essay, editors Fast and Buller deftly interweave conceptual parameters, historiographical material, and theoretical constructs so as to create cogency in the selection of writings to follow. They provide an overview on key

historical scholarship devoted to Mennonite women, pointing out that the specific position of mothers as preservers of cultural values had not been closely examined. A brief survey of relevant literary works shows that the subject of the Mennonite mother has had enduring interest and its treatment has ranged from the celebratory to the critical. In addition to summarizing the state of the research and creative work on Mennonite mothers, Fast and Epp also use the introduction to place their project within the burgeoning field of Mothering Studies. Noting critical feminist writings and terms for readers is important here; witness their declaration of a preference for the term 'mothering' (suggestive of a mother's agency and power) over 'motherhood' (denotative of a patriarchal institution). Readers are also alerted to the organization of essays into four sections, *Picturing Mothers and Daughters*, *Mothering across Generations*, *Challenging Mennonite Motherhood*, and *Mothering In and Around Culture(s)*. The thematic, rather than genre-driven, organization of material is effective and enables productive conversations to emerge.

In the first section, authors explore how the Mennonite mother and/or the mothering Mennonite is perceived by her daughter, and how these perceptions and experiences have shaped her own approaches to this practice. It is appropriate to open with Magdalene Redekop, who revisits her groundbreaking essay, 'Through the Mennonite Looking Glass,' of 25 years earlier. Continuing its discussion of the theme of the Mennonite mother's erasure of identity, her essay is a poignant rumination over her own mother's wedding photograph and her experience with adoptive and step-mothering. Edna Froese continues this leitmotif in her meditation on canonical writings about Mennonite women, a trenchant and sometimes heartrending exposé of the impossibilities embodied in the Mennonite ideal of motherhood. The labor of mothering, as witnessed by daughters, is the subject of the two other contributions to this section, Kirsten Eve Beachy's personal essay titled 'Milk,' in which she explores the various kinds of labor associated with her mother and mother-in-law's lives, and Mary Ann Loewen's discursive analysis of the columns her mother produced for a church publication. Both approach the question of forging identity within particular cultural constraints, and points to the inter-generational struggles to come to terms with disparate means to identity.

Intergenerational dynamics, extended family narratives, and the notion of inheritance serve as the focus for the next section of essays in *Mothering Mennonite*. Connie Braun's selections of poetry, inspired by her WWII-era refugee heritage, light on core issues of Mennonite mothering. Two particularly noteworthy poems are her 'I am from many places,' concerning a daughter's marking out and settling of her own space within the faith tradition, and 'A talk with my son about God,' a mother's stern and stirring sermon about honoring the faith of one's parents. Susie Fisher Stoesz provides a compelling analysis of how Mennonite mothers have used storytelling, through the spoken word and material culture, to preserve family histories and to secure the bonds of community. Social identity and the mothering Mennonite are taken up in the final essays in this section by authors with contrasting backgrounds. The Loewen siblings, who are multi-generational Mennonites, offer a co-authored narrative of the lives of three women and their family tree and their varied forms of engagement with maternal identity, whereas Wendy A. Crocker, who is neither mother nor Mennonite, presents her insights into Mennonite mothering as observed from her position as a school administrator who works with Old Colony children in her informative educational study, "'Home" Schooling.'

Another contributor who comes outside the Mennonite tradition, Tomomi Naka, leads out in the next section on challenging traditional cultural constructions of Mennonite motherhood. An anthropologist from Japan and a single woman living in a conservative American Mennonite community, Naka capitalized on her unusual position to query the place of "single sisters" and their approach to employment outside the home. Importantly, the implications of childlessness in the Mennonite culture, whether by choice, as discussed in artist Becca J. R. Lachman's 'Creative (M)othering,' or due to infertility, as broached in Christine Crouse-Dick's '(In)fertile Encounters,' are given just attention. The stories of women who have refused traditional narratives and thereby forged unique paths can be read as both inspirational and disheartening, for while they intimate the power women are increasingly assuming to fashion their own identities, they also speak to the constant negotiations that Mennonite women must make as they attempt to bridge personal needs and social expectations.

The last section of *Mothering Mennonite* is its largest, and provides a space for case studies of the impact of specific contexts in which Mennonite motherhood has been shaped over time. Tracey Leigh Dowdeswell's essay assesses the impact of the modern scientific motherhood on Canadian Mennonite women, and convincingly argues that this movement undermined their previously-held position of authority in the maternal realm. The disenfranchisement of Mennonite woman is the topic of Cory Anderson's contribution, in which he queries the effects of Beachy Amish-Mennonite evangelical literature on women's sense of identity. He contends that such writings tend to aggregate women into the inseparable roles of on woman-wife-mother, and thus not encourage self-actualization. The final three chapters of the volume offer a rosier view of how women can find authentic ways to live their Mennonite faith and honor its traditions while functioning in global contexts. Melanie Springer Mock's consideration of *More-with-Less Cookbook*, the go-to lifestyle manual of many North American Mennonite women, suggests that it provided a means to find in their roles as homemaker and mother something progressive in its awareness of how simple living and cooking was part of responsible global citizenship. Examples of how Mennonite mothering has been performed in Latin America can be found in Doreen Helen Klassen's study of children's play among Low German-speaking communities in northern Mexico and Belize, as well as in Jennifer Chappell Deckert's essay on the way the Mennonite church has harnessed its mothering power to provide care and compassion for refugees and victims of violence.

The editors state that the guiding questions for the project included the following: 'how specific religious groups impart values to children and adolescents that define their future roles; how the church, both consciously and unconsciously, transmits expectations of maternal roles; how memory and nostalgia for lost mothers and grandmothers affects an individual's Mennonite identity and possible maternity; and how Mennonite culture and value systems are embraced in cross-cultural settings, passed along from mother to mother' (14). This begs the question: what elements of Mennonite mothering are unique to those of the faith and which of these ideals, traditions, and experiences might overlap with those of other religious faiths? While its focus is on the praxis of mothering within Mennonitism and its aim was to

revalue the contributions of women in this faith community as mothers and/or as mothering agents, a byproduct of this volume is the invitation for other communities of mothers to ask similar questions. In sum, Buller, Fast, and the contributors to *Mothering Mennonite* are to be commended not only for producing a highly readable and fascinating inquiry into the praxis of mothering within Mennonitism; they are also to be thanked for encouraging future studies into the intersections between religion, culture, and the maternal.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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