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### Book and Exhibition Review

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**BOOK AND EXHIBITION REVIEW**

***Mothers without Their Children.*  
Editors: Charlotte Beyer and Andrea Lea  
Robertson. (Bradford: Demeter Press,  
2019. pp. 284. \$34.95)**

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Is a mother a mother without her children? As a follow-up, how do we as a society conceive of the mother without her child that is without the very being who “unequivocally define[s] a mother as a mother” (11)? These provocative questions regarding the figure of the mother without her child frame the collection *Mothers without Their Children*, edited by Charlotte Beyer and Andrea Lea Robertson, and published by Demeter Press. The resounding response of contributors to these overarching questions is yes, and it is complicated. Both Beyer and Robertson, editors as well as writer/theorists, admit to a fascination with the figure of the mother without her children across historical times, and representationally. They write in the introduction to the collection that with the exception of motherhood scholars Rosie Jackson, whose work considers mothers who leave or live without their children, and Elaine Tuttle Hansen, whose 1997 *Mothers without Their Children*, from whom editors borrow their title, explores literary representations of mothers without their children; theirs is the only work to do so from a feminist intersectional, transnational, and multimodal perspective. *Mothers without Their Children* is a compelling and thoroughgoing read. Accessible to academic and lay audiences alike, the collection is by turns scholarly and literary, and will undoubtedly draw the attention and critical engagement of motherhood scholars, both nationally and internationally.

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Consisting of sixteen chapters divided thematically into five subsections, i.e. 'Textualities and Ambiguous Mothering Status,' 'Institutional Frontiers and Othered Mothers,' 'Having to Live and Mother through It: Economic, Geographic, Political, and Radicalized Inequities,' and 'Motherhood Reconfigured by Death,' and including bibliographies following each chapter, and a Notes on Contributors, the collection does the heavy lifting of disrupting normative ideas of the maternal extant in society and culture, and across nations and times; ideas that obscure, denigrate, or outright ignore the figure of the mother without her children. The collection is composed of literary analysis of memoirs and life writings, as well as straightforward academic research essays, vignettes, poetry, and hybrid and ethnographic essays. All these different literary mediums consider the figure of the mother without her child, in fiction, nonfiction, but overwhelmingly in past and present national and cultural realities. To say that this mother experienced denigration and abuse, cultural shame and ridicule, across the West, and throughout history, is to put it lightly. To refuse to

acknowledge this maternal figure her agency, activism, and speaking back is, however, to deny what is for her a reality, and that is her refusal to and resistance against being denied as a mother, and across national and cultural bounds, and historical time.

Two chapters I found to be particularly of interest were Shihoko Nakagawa's 'Towards Reproductive Justice: Single Mothers' Activism against the U.S. Child Welfare System,' and Rebecca Jaremko Bromwich's 'Towards Solidarity in Mothering at the Borderlands: Suggestions for Better Legal and Social Treatment of Mothers Migrating across Borders without Children to Work.' Nakagawa's chapter considers the influence of the U.S. Child Protective Services' (CPS) intervention in families, and also considers the activism of single mothers without their children, which developed due to their experience of and perspective on CPS. Nakagawa writes, 'historically, single motherhood and neglect were mutually and simultaneously constructed as social problems'. This was despite or perhaps in light of the way 'many of the defining indices of child neglect were essential to the survival of families headed by single mothers' (165). Nakagawa focuses explicitly on the experiences of poor single Black mothers who, due to losing their children to CPS, are now maternal activists working to ensure the return of their children. These mothers also advocate for and assist other single mothers without their children, and forge and foster community to avoid the isolation that can result from custodial loss. Such action also helps mothers mitigate the guilt of losing their child or children. Nakagawa cites SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective in the U.S., and In Our Own Voice: National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda as two such examples. She argues throughout the chapter that patriarchal and white norming socio-cultural images and ideas of the single mother, and in particular of the single Black mother, carry negative material and psycho-emotional effects that directly impact the mother and her children, as well as influence legislation that disproportionately disfavors single Black mothers and their children. Nakagawa continues that single Black mothers are the most vulnerable to losing children to Child Protective Services. Poverty, abuse, addiction, and maternal disinterest are contributing factors to CPS's

intervention, which often leads to the removal of the child from the home. However, Nakagawa argues that the situation of the single mother, especially the single Black mother and her children, is exacerbated by racist, sexist, patriarchal legislation and dogma that disfavors the single Black mother. Significantly, Nakagawa links the persistent increase in numbers of children of single Black mothers entering the child welfare system to changing CPS legislation in the 1970s that favoured foster care and adoption to family maintenance; in large part, the author suggests, due to the privatization of child welfare. Nakagawa writes, 'If mothers are single, then they have an increased risk of being confirmed as bad mothers in the child welfare system because their presence challenges heteronormative ideas of relationships, childbearing, and family' (169). What has resulted from CPS's intervention and subsequent removal of children from the home is single Black mothers' ardent refusal to go unrecognized *as* mothers. Nakagawa argues this maternal activism challenges and subverts any idea of single Black mothers who experience custodial loss as being the passive victims of a system 'founded on racism, sexism, and classism,' and 'significantly shaped by neoliberalism' (169). Instead, this maternal activism and speaking back counters an 'overarching classist and racist system that constantly blames mothers' (175).

In 'Towards Solidarity in Mothering at the Borderlands: Suggestions for Better Legal and Social Treatment of Mothers Migrating Across Borders without Children to Work,' Rebecca Jaremko Bromwich considers her experience as a mother working and sometimes living away from her children in relation to those of the Filipino immigrant live-in domestic care workers she employs. Like Bromwich, these international working mothers live away from their children to provide for their children and to achieve for themselves some measure of economic and personal freedom. According to Bromwich, her interests and those of the care workers she employs through Canada's Live-In Care Program align as mothers who work and live without their children. Bromwich thus favors fair labour conditions for these women who cross borders to care for themselves and their children. Bromwich also argues these international care-workers' rights and liberties are limited in Canada, and that these limitations render the international care workers 'vulnerable to round-the-clock work

requirements, nonpayment for overtime, confiscation of passports, and other abuses' (185). Further to this, international care workers 'make less money than permanent residents or Canadian servants of globalization' (185). However, without these care workers, argues Bromwich, neither she nor other families in Canada would be able to function. Bromwich, a married mother of four children under the age of four, certainly would not have the successful career she does, nor the emotional health she can maintain for herself, without employing a full-time care worker for her children. She thus argues for a public structuring of 'care giving labor' so parents' and children's needs are met, and in an affordable way, as well as for 'securing the citizenship and other human rights of domestic care givers' (197). What Canada seems to need most, suggests Bromwich, is a democratizing of childcare, and affordable live-in care. This must be delivered in a way that does not privatize 'the issue of unpaid labour to individual households', so that 'good enough childcare' (197) is not available only to the wealthy. To democratize childcare would also be to render it *not* the 'sole responsibility...and blame of any flaws...onto individual women' (189).

Subjects undertaken in the collection include trans-historical experiences of and perspectives on maternal agency, the link between motherhood and nationhood in England, Ireland, and in Bengali culture; national narratives that glorify motherhood and vilify actual mothers; mother-child separation due to imprisonment, mental illness, systematic oppression; new-born custodial loss and a cultural romanticizing of the nuclear family model, etc. Mothers have a voice in this collection. They theorize from their experiences. They refuse to be silent and choose to be silent as an act of revolutionary reclaiming. They also lactate and donate milk post neonatal death, or refuse, and end lactation as quickly and expediently as possible following neonatal death. *Mothers without Their Children* joins in other feminist, world, and Black feminist efforts to break silences about women's experiences and perspectives *as* mothers, and in particular as mothers without their children. The collection highlights and champions mothers who persist and insist on their claims to motherhood. By foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of mothers on 'the borders of motherhood,' to borrow from Hansen (in fact, many of the chapters throughout show the

influence of Hansen's original work, as well as that of Black American feminists), *Mothers without Their Children* provides a context and a platform for mothers without their children. The collection challenges even as it renders more malleable and expansive motherhood studies, as well as theories about, and representations, of the maternal. It does this to consider more readily and directly the experiences and perspectives of mothers without their children. *Mothers without Their Children* breaks silences that many of us many motherhood scholars may not have known were there. Brava!

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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