

Affect for Mothers and Others

Zsuzsanna Lénárt-Muszka

Lane, Julia and Eleonora Joensuu, eds. *Everyday World-Making: Toward an Understanding of Affect and Mothering*. Bradford, ON: Demeter P, 2018. 340 pages. ISBN 978-1-77258-140-9. Pbk. \$34.95.

What brings poop, clowns, and intuition together? *Everyday World-Making*, a 2018 collection from Canada's motherhood studies press, does its best to address—through the lens of affect studies—these and even more controversial topics from the perspective of motherhood. Offering a blend of the expressive and the scholarly—sometimes within one thematic unit, sometimes within one chapter—this intriguing volume is unique in its thematization of the various aspects of the maternal, such as pregnancy, giving birth, and breastfeeding, as well as in reflecting on the challenges of performing and narrating mothering.

In keeping with the spirit of the book's intentions, the introduction problematizes the separation of academia from the practices of "affect-filled" maternal experiences (1). The editors highlight that instead of bringing the notion of the ideal or abstract mother under scrutiny, the collection interrogates the everyday, lived experience of motherhood. The introduction also gives a context for the definition of affect, emphasizing the difficulty of the precise delineation of its boundaries and comparing its elusiveness with the similarly fuzzy term "mother" (3-4). Lane and Joensuu's intention is to examine not what affect is, but rather what it does (8) and how it illuminates the narratives of mothers. Relying on the work of psychosocial theory expert Lisa Baraitser, the editors further admit that it is impossible to narrativize the everyday experiences of (early) mothering in a coherent manner due to its fragmentary nature, also foreshadowing some of the chapters' unclarified edges.

This somewhat clumsy introduction operates with the feminine gesture of self-delegitimization using terms such as "attempts," "hopes," and "a place to start" when referring to the effort of the contributors and to the entirety of the book (9). The fact that the editors—Lane, who is involved in clown studies, and Joensuu, who does research on the philosophy of education (328)—admit they are no experts either in affect studies or motherhood studies (3) strikes a similar chord. Lane and Joensuu furthermore acknowledge that most of the contributions were written from a privileged (i.e., white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class) perspective

Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies 25.2. 2019. Copyright © 2019 by HJEAS. All rights to reproduction in any form are reserved.

that, despite its limitations, inspires “further considerations” and “future questions and discussions” (10). However, instead of recognizing the legitimacy of the lived experience of the excluded groups, this reductive perspective seems to relegate them to the margins—despite the editors’ best intentions.

The volume contains two unique pieces named “Sisterly Conversations,” one following the introduction, the other, at end of the book. They consist of the editors’ intimate interviews with female family members about motherhood: Joensuu interviews her sister and Lane talks to her sister-in-law. These dialogues are testaments to the impossibility of a coherent narrative because of the everyday constraints of mothering: both start out as in-depth, in-person interviews, only to be interrupted by the demands of mothering and taken up later in fragments and often via email.

In-between the conversations we find three, thematically organized units that contain a variety of genres, such as poems, essays, and studies. The first one, “Becoming and Performing Mother,” for example, opens with Kari Marken’s poem “milk,” a grave account of a breastfeeding journey. This piece stands in contrast with the optimism of the preceding conversation and its placement gives evidence that the book is not willing to subjugate the voices of struggling mothers. Somatic therapist Stephanie Theodora Park’s essay “Navigating the Waters of Early Motherhood” delves into her experiences with mothers who need to “get unstuck” (43) and adjust to the monumental transitions pregnancy and giving birth bring (44). She details the “affective practices” (44) she works with, thus hoping to equip those readers who are new mothers with tools that can help them navigate through these changes (43). What makes this essay truly multidisciplinary is its inclusion of illustrations, personal examples, journal extracts, scientific explanations, and practical advice.

In a similar vein, Julia Lane’s “A Poetics of Maternal Failure” convincingly argues that the otherwise eschewed maternal failure is not only to be expected but should be a welcome and potentially empowering aspect of mothering. Compared to Park’s essay, this article is more straightforward and takes fewer detours; still, it recognizes the author’s privilege concerning her racial and socio-economic background, and provides self-reflexive commentary about her private life and clowning practice, underscoring the volume’s ambition to be more than a scholarly collection. “Objects of a Maternal Haunting” by Anna Johnson takes the reader back to the fault lines of the academic and the artistic rendering of the maternal. In a very postmodern gesture, this piece takes the paraphernalia of academic writing and twists them by offering a faux-endnote that contains the lines “I may have

found something, but I am not sure yet. I hope to return to this later” (102-3). The placement of the last chapter, “Empty Maternal,” by Justyna Wierchowska, is another example of the volume’s oscillation between the academic and the expressive. This paper utilizes a psychoanalytic framework to read performance artist Marina Abramović’s *The Artist Is Present* (2010) and explicates how it pertains to prevalent Western images of the maternal. Researched thoroughly and argued with painstaking precision, the paper demonstrates Wierchowska’s extensive knowledge of psychoanalytic theory.

The other two units, “Becoming and the Potentials of ‘Dark’ Affect” and “Manoeuvring the Boundaries of Mother,” are similar to the first one in their oscillation between academic and non-academic approaches. Sandra L. Faulkner, in her “That Baby Will Cost You,” joins the ranks of Susan Bordo and Adrienne Rich in discussing—in a heavily autoethnographic manner—the sacrifices the pregnant-woman-as-container has to make in her self-policing efforts. At first, it might seem that this essay will offer a happy absolution to mothers and assure them that they can escape the effects of Foucauldian self-surveillance; however, the wry conclusion suggests otherwise. The other three writings in this section—two scholarly articles and a poem—all aim to re-conceptualize a certain aspect of motherhood, be it disgust in Joensuu’s “Blood, Mud, Poop, and Vomit,” violent intensities and infanticide in Alessandro Castellini’s “Unforgivable or Outlaw Emotions?,” or divorce in Marken’s poem, “fail.”

The third thematic unit examines mothering from a different perspective as it takes up the difficulties of defining who is a “mother.” Nicole Bell’s “Anishinaabe Fasting” could be a welcome diversion from the white, middle-class perspective of the other chapters as it offers an ecocritical reading of mother and the Earth as creators from a First Nations point of view. However, the paper reads like a textbook entry: a lengthy introduction of tribal beliefs and practices, is followed by quotes from First Nations Elders as well as a diagram and a chart illustrating Anishinaabe beliefs concerning life stages. Its didactic nature and simple language make this chapter stand out from the other, more sophisticated ones. Brenda Benaglia’s “Mothering the Mother” is similar to Bell’s chapter in its slow pace and efforts to educate. With data and reflections from her “ongoing doctoral research on the emerging doula movement in Italy” (239), she interrogates the intersections of affective spaces and doula practices, but in a more organic manner than the preceding article.

The unit’s closing segments throw into relief two fresh aspects of mothering. “Instinct, Expertise, Connection” by Emily Sadowski conceptualizes mother’s intuition, an often dismissed phenomenon, as “affective awareness” (261). It offers an excellent overview of the process