

lesbian mothering is in the clarity with which the voices of the mothers she interviewed come through to the reader, as they relate their experiences firsthand. Nelson interviewed 30 Albertan lesbian mothers (including both biological and non-biological mothers) and explores questions of family formation, domestic life, and the factors which led these women to their decision to have children.

In her introduction, Nelson explains that the possibility of lesbian mothering, particularly through donor insemination, is a result of an "ideology of reproductive choice" facilitated by increasing access to contraception and new reproductive technologies. Reproductive choice, then, means not only the freedom to avoid pregnancy, but the also freedom for previously excluded women, such as infertile women, single women, and lesbians, to become pregnant. Although she presents a compelling analysis, Nelson underplays the years of feminist organizing and lobbying which led to an ideology of choice being available to women, and tends to credit medical technology as the sole motivating force. Clearly, it is not only the development of artificial insemination techniques which have led to the increase in the number and visibility of lesbian mothers in the past decade. Factors such as campaigns for the social recognition of lesbian and gay families and women's increasing access to paid employment are not examined.

According to Nelson, the ideology of choice means that, increasingly, motherhood is the result of a conscious decision, rather than simply an unquestioned expectation. She contends that because pregnancy cannot "just happen" in the context of a lesbian relationship, but has to be carefully planned, lesbians are an ideal group to look at in an examination of women's reproductive decision-making (and in so doing she tends to overlook the extent to which many heterosexual women grapple with reproductive decisions). Although the question of what constitutes mothering and motherhood is a central focus

of the book, the question of what a lesbian is remains curiously uninterrogated. Despite the fact that a number of the women in her sample became pregnant through having sex with men, Nelson asserts that "[l]esbian women in lesbian relationships will never accidentally find themselves pregnant." Presumably, Nelson relied on self-identification in order to classify her respondents as lesbian, but as much recent literature on lesbian identities indicates, one cannot assume that all self-identified lesbians share a common set of sexual practices or relationship arrangements.

In looking at women's reproductive decisions, Nelson concludes that there are not significant differences between the decision-making process of lesbian mothers and that of heterosexual mothers. She identifies three central areas of consideration in this process: a stable relationship with a partner, emotional readiness, and financial security. Of these three factors, Nelson found that financial security was a "marginal" concern for the women she spoke with, while stable relationships and emotional preparation were far more crucial. This, I think, is where the limitations of Nelson's sample are most clearly manifested. All of her respondents were in couples, and had their children while in a couple, so obviously this was an important value to them. However, interviews with single mothers might have shown that being in a couple is not always a primary consideration in the decision to have children. In addition, all of her subjects were white and middle-class, most had post-secondary education, and all were employed, except for two who were students. Interviews with women with less access to economic privilege might have indicated that for some women, financial security is of paramount importance in making reproductive decisions. In order to fully explore this issue, it would have been illuminating to interview lesbians who had considered having children and ultimately decided against it. In an era of increasing attacks to

publicly-funded health care, child care, education, and social assistance, it seems hasty to dismiss economics as a marginal consideration in the decision to have children, particularly for lesbian mothers, who do not have access to statistically higher male incomes.

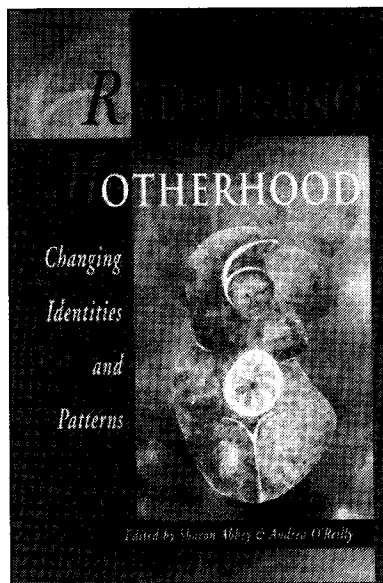
The anecdotes in Fiona Nelson's *Lesbian Motherhood* make for engaging, poignant, and sometimes humorous reading for anyone who has children or has considered doing so. However, do not look to this book for the wide-reaching exploration of lesbian families in Canada promised by the title. Although the regional limitations of her sample are understandable, the invisibility of single and working-class mothers, the somewhat idealistic representation of lesbian couple relationships, and the sweeping generalizations made about the experiences of heterosexual mothers severely limit the conclusiveness of this research.

#### **REDEFINING MOTHERHOOD: CHANGING IDENTITIES AND PATTERNS**

Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly,  
eds. Toronto: Second Story Press,  
1998.

#### **BY BRIGITTE HARRIS**

The 18 chapters in this engaging, multi-authored book present diverse ways of investigating and making meaning of "mother," "mothering," and "motherhood." Qualitative methods—autobiographical, biographical, ethnographic, phenomenological, historical, case study, and participatory research—elicit women's stories. These stories demonstrate the complexity of women's experience and their meanings of mothering. Each chapter presents women's stories and a lucid discussion of the literature, providing a basis from which to question, criti-



cize, support, refine, and rethink existing theories. Reading the book engaged me in an active reflective process.

The reflective process, both collaborative and individual, is illustrated throughout the book. For example, Andrea O'Reilly describes how her course leads students to "dismantle" the patriarchal mother-daughter estrangement narrative to build a new relational narrative. Elizabeth Diem engages in participatory research discussions with mothers of problematic adolescent daughters which allows them over time to "unravel" the disempowering myth of the perfect mother. Martha McMahon reflects on how the loss of her mother brought insight into her choice to not have children, questioning conceptions of motherhood by examining her subjectivity as a non-mother. Her use of "creatively reconstructed letters to a friend" is a particularly effective means of allowing the reader an "in" on her deliberative process. Rishma Dunlop questions patriarchal assumptions negating the embodied knowledge of female experience and demonstrates the power of writing, especially poetry, to capture and examine women's lived experience.

A particular strength of this book is in the insiders', outsiders', and marginalized voices it presents. Motherhood issues are examined from the perspectives of mothers: academics,

teachers, and foster mothers. Those who are not mothers provide an outsider's perspective: adolescent and grown daughters, and the legal and medical establishments. Of particular interest are chapters dealing with those whose stories have not been, or are not often, told. A lesbian mother reflects on her daughter's coming to terms with her "different" family. A researcher describes the dynamic between mothers and daughters in families with a disabled parent. A filmmaker reclaims her historical roots by telling the stories of black mothers in their Nova Scotia communities. Another researcher recounts black women's experiences of motherhood to counter the pathologizing of these families in the "male" literature. A white mother reflects on the role of family narratives in her black daughter's identity formation. All of these voices demonstrate the richness and diversity in the experience of those mothering and those mothered.

The editors facilitate this reflection process in their organization of the chapters into four sections. The first section deals with issues of socialization and education, the second with maternal values and identities, the third with personal and historical narratives, and the last with public and state policy. As such the book flows from the social to personal to public themes, providing a conceptual map accessible to students.

The editors also provide helpful and specific suggestions to instructors for promoting reflection in course activities: through reflective journals, case studies, and thematic research projects. This section includes guidelines for assignments, evaluation, and how certain chapters can be used.

As I pointed out earlier, to read this book is to engage in an ongoing inner dialogue, comparing and contrasting one's own stories and rethinking one's theoretical understandings. The book is alive with the voices of mothers and daughters. It delineates issues in fresh and engaging ways and it models reflection. As such this book makes an engrossing read and an excellent course text.

## THE CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS OF MOTHERHOOD

Sharon Hays. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996.

BY BERYL BAIGENT

An assistant professor of sociology and women's studies at the University of Virginia, Sharon Hays has penned a significant book, in seven hefty chapters, which explores the disparity between "intensive mothering" and the work ethic. Her thesis states: "the contemporary cultural model of socially appropriate mothering takes the form of an ideology of intensive mothering ... a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children."

In a society where over half of all mothers with young children are now working outside the home, Hays poses the query as to why western culture pressures women to dedicate so much of themselves to childrearing. She further asks why a logic of unselfish nurturing guides the behaviour of mothers in such a society. These two puzzling phenomena constitute what she calls "the cultural contradictions of contemporary motherhood."

Hays analyzes mothering as an historically constructed ideology. Her method includes in-depth interviews with a small sample of mothers, as well as textual analysis of childrearing manuals, and a survey of the history of ideas on childrearing. She explores the cultural disparity between home and the outside world over the past 200 years in western society, noting that the personal contradiction between being a mother and a career woman is a contemporary occurrence, appearing only in the past 50 years, since women have wished to participate in both worlds.

Hays refers to the '50s as "the era of suburban life, domestic bliss, the