

Motherspace,” etc. In this section, Davis- Thompson urges mothers to meditate to be kind to themselves, and to “settle yourself into the womb of God’s sweet motherlove.” The second half of the book, “Motherlove,” focuses on a mother’s relationship with her children (of all ages), with themes including discipline, influences, authority, and spiritual inheritance. She uses inclusive language throughout.

Most meditations are preceded by a quotation and followed by a brief affirmation, such as “I will point my child in the direction of his honorable self.” Davis- Thompson quotes a rich variety of sources, including Audre Lorde, Renita Weems, Wayne Dwyer, Deepak Chopra, and T.D. Jakes. There are also many biblical quotations. The book is beautifully put together with a colourful mural on the cover by African American artist Kimberly Camp; Gracing many of the pages are black and white African-inspired graphics.

There is nothing radical or earth-shaking about this book. The author is articulating for contemporary mothers a long standing tradition and she admirably fulfills her purpose of inspiring readers. I found myself wishing for more details, anecdotes, and illustrations. The book does not attempt to be scholarly, analytical, or even narrative; it is pithy, terse, and wise. It is superior to other similar books because it is so unsentimental; it does not idealize self-sacrifice or submission to men (the way so many devotional books do), and it is not at all legalistic. This is valuable reading for any mother (including Euro-Americans) who want daily inspiration for the gritty work of raising children today, especially those who were not nurtured well themselves. It speaks to “other mothers” such as fathers, teachers, mentors, and grandparents. Indirectly, it will interest scholars who seek insight into African American spirituality.

Motherlove is being marketed to African American mothers of all ages (including teen mothers, battered women, and low-income women); the publisher also promotes workshops by the author and a book-donation program for needy women.

Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency

E. N. Glenn, G. Chang and L. R. Forcey, Eds.
New York: Routledge, 1994

Reviewed by Leigh M. O’Brien

This book brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars who “provide a variety of perspectives on mothering as a socially constructed set of activities and relationships” (ix). The first chapter, which serves as an introduction,

presents an overview of social constructions of mothering organized around five themes: diversity in mothering; ideology and the construction of mothering; deconstructing (or, as the author puts it, “decomposing”) mothering; the politics of mothering; and mothering and the difference-equality knot.

These five themes are addressed in detail in the chapters that follow. Overarching premises are reflected in the following quotation from the first chapter:

I propose looking at mothering as a historically and culturally variable relationship “in which one individual nurtures and cares for another.” Mothering occurs within specific social contexts that vary in terms of material and cultural resources and constraints. How mothering is conceived, organized, and carried out is not simply determined by these conditions, however. *Mothering is constructed through men’s and women’s actions within specific historical circumstances* [italics added]. Thus agency is central to an understanding of mothering as a social, rather than biological, construct. (Chang, 1994: 3)

The reader sees exactly how mothering *is* constructed in chapters such as “Diverted Mothering: Representations of Caregivers of Color in the Age of ‘Multiculturalism’” (Part 1); “Beyond Mothers and Fathers: Ideology in a Patriarchal Society” (Part 2); “Working at Motherhood: Chicana and Mexican Immigrant Mothers and Employment” (Part 3); and the chapter that still resonates in my head, “Mothering under Slavery in the Antebellum South” (Part 4).

The book’s strength is also its weakness, however. A very broad focus illuminates the subject of mothering, but the volume does not achieve coherence. I was left with an expanded but partial understanding of the book’s general themes. Perhaps more editorial direction, more linking of themes across the four parts, would have made the book more accessible and hence more useful.

I do not hesitate, however, to recommend this book to those interested in how mothering is viewed through diverse eyes and constructed in varying circumstances. Dipping in at will may well provoke a reader’s thoughts and reflections on the connections between mothering and gender/race/social class, feminism, and culture. For it *is* crucially important that we hear diverse voices telling of mothering experiences, and that we become aware of the ideologies impacting views and practices of mothers and mothering. We are all diminished if we “buy into” an essentialized, universal, or overly deterministic conception of mothering; we must acknowledge the agency inherent in mothering and support those who do the hard work of mothering in multiple contexts.