

Andrea O'Reilly, ed. *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering*.

Toronto: Women's Press, 2003.

Reviewed by Silke Frischmuth

Following Toni Morrison's advice to "write the books that I wanted to read" (3), Andrea O'Reilly has assembled essays – previously published in the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* and her own edited books – in a volume for use in courses on mothering and motherhood. *Mother Outlaws* is a significant contribution to the theory on empowered mothering and helps fill a gap in theoretical works on this subject.

O'Reilly takes up the key distinction that Adrienne Rich makes between the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is oppressive for women, and a women-centered style of child-rearing that empowers women. O'Reilly contends that mothers, in order to experience mothering as empowering, have to separate themselves from the ideal of the "good" mother and become "bad" mothers, or "mother outlaws." Mother outlaws are women who raise their children in opposition to the normative motherhood ideal of the always present and self-sacrificing mother.

The book consists of five sections that cover the following topics: feminist mothering; lesbian mothering; African-American mothering; mothers and daughters; and mothers and sons. In her excellent introduction, O'Reilly traces the history of normative mothering practices in North America since World War II, and points out that motherhood is a cultural practice rather than a biological function (5). She discusses the ideology and practice of intensive mothering that emerged in the 1980s, with its focus on

the perceived needs of the child. The author emphasizes that the “discourse of intensive mothering becomes oppressive not because children have needs, but because we, as a culture, dictate that only the biological mother is capable of fulfilling them” (11). Empowered mothering, in contrast, “recognizes that both mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy” (12). In each of the five sections, the essays explore topics related to alternative mothering styles. They show how women of all races, classes, and sexual orientations are exposed to, accept, resist, or negotiate the dominant discourse of “sacrificial motherhood.”

I was especially interested in the essays on African-American mothering which construct a mothering style that differs completely from the white middle-class ideal of intensive biological mothering. The essays show how traditional African-American women-centered mothering, community, and other-mothering benefit women, children, and communities alike.

Another essay that stands out is Paula Caplan’s “Don’t Blame Mother – Then and Now.” Caplan discusses the mother blame inherent in the dominant psychological discourse and how it characterizes anything related to mothers as pathological and devoid of value. She uncovers the scapegoat function that mothers fulfill in North American society, assigning them the blame for such social problems as crime. Her harsh criticism of psychoanalysis, and the ways in which psychiatrists decide who is “normal,” is refreshing for every mother torn between her interest in education or paid work and her alleged duty to live only for her children.

This first Canadian volume of scholarly work on empowered mothering is a must for anyone interested in the contradictions that underlie the experience of mothering and

the institution of motherhood.