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**From the Selected Works of Kristi Branham**

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## Book Review: Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture

Kristi Branham, *Western Kentucky University*



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Elizabeth Podnieks's edited collection of essays, *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture*, tackles this enormous topic with gusto through an exploration of the representation of motherhood in popular culture in North America and the United Kingdom. Podnieks broadly defines popular culture to include a range of media courting a mass audience. In her introduction, she marshals an overload of evidence in support of her claim that since 2007, popular culture has exploded with moms. This explosion is fueled by the "Mommy Wars," the media-fueled debate that pits working mothers against stay-at-home moms, and the "New Momism," which refers to the intensified and romanticized expectations for mothers in the twenty-first century.

Podnieks clearly situates her collection in the long history of maternal scholarship, invoking Andrea O'Reilly, founder of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement in 2010 and harbinger of all things motherhood studies today. As Podnieks notes, motherhood is not a topic that hasn't been tackled before. The essays collected here collectively acknowledge the feminist scholarship on motherhood, both as a social, cultural, and political institution and as an individual woman's experience.

As this latest foray into maternal scholarship demonstrates, each generation of feminist daughters must address the popular representation of motherhood as well as the previous generation's concept and practice of mothering. In the mid-twentieth century, academic and popular writers alike took up the representation of motherhood, most notably in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976) and in Nancy Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). Podnieks situates her collection specifically within the maternal scholarship that examines the popular representation of motherhood and mothering, acknowledging the important work of scholars such as E. Ann Kaplan (*Motherhood and Representation*, 1992), Shari L. Thurer (*The Myths of Motherhood*, 1994), and Sharon Hays (*The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, 1996).

*Mediating Moms* is divided thematically into four sections: "Maternal Surveillance," "Generational Motherhood," "Pregnant and Postpartum Bodies," and "Medical Interventions and Reproductive Technologies." Each section contains between four to six essays, making this collection a significant contribution to maternal scholarship and discourse. The first section, *Maternal Surveillance*, addresses the myriad of ways that twenty-first century mothers are subjected to constant oversight as a way of circumscribing or delimiting the mother's power and influence. The six essays that comprise this section address the social and cultural function of maternal surveillance in animated situation comedies, reality television, celebrity culture, and sensationalized news stories.

The four essays that make up section two, "Generational Motherhood," map the connections and disconnections of mothering across generations. From women's popular fiction to the postfeminist and Third Wave "grassroots" efforts of 'zines, these essays not only demonstrate the ways in which motherhood is defined and transmitted across generations, but also challenge the socially specific ideology regarding age-appropriate motherhood. For example, Imelda Whelehan writes about woman's fiction since 1968, and Irene Gammel looks at L. M. Montgomery's 1908 novel *Anne of Green Gables*. This section also addresses the representation of motherhood in the current century and the particulars of that experience. Beth O'Connor argues that *Yo' Mama Magazine*, a 'zine addressed to teen mothers, provides these mothers a space to share and critique dominant representations of motherhood.

Although all the essays in this collection wrestle with the presence of the mother within popular culture, the third section, "Pregnant and Postpartum Bodies," centers on the taboos and fantasies of the pregnant body and the new mother. These essays argue that motherhood is both a pre and postpartum experience and that the pregnant body is one that is discursively constructed as full of risk. The topics range from an analysis of the public discourse surrounding breast feeding to the spectacle of starving and suffering African mothers in first-world media.

The fourth and final section, "Medical Interventions and Reproductive Technologies," includes five essays. As Podnieks explains in her introduction, "the most contentious maternal issues today deal with fertility and reproduction" (23). Sally Mennill begins the section by exploring the rhetoric of passivity in maternity literature. Other chapters address the confluence of celebrity culture and ideologies regarding postpartum depression and representations of motherhood in the television series *Grey's Anatomy*. Although the essays collected here primarily focus on representations of motherhood in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, *Mediating Moms* fails in a significant way to consider the relationship between popular motherhood discourse and women of color. Only two essays explicitly address motherhood and mothering for women of color, H. Louise Davis's "Watch Them Suffer, Watch Them Die" and Hosu Kim's "S/Kin of Virtual Mothers: Loss and Mourning on a Korean

Birthmothers' Website."

The rest of the collection primarily focuses on popular representations of motherhood that convey dominant hegemonic ideologies. Given the long history of black mothers in film and television, this is an unfortunate oversight in an otherwise excellent addition to motherhood studies.