

Review Article

Motherhood, Labour, and the Museum: Two Perspectives

Amy K. Levin

Rebecca Louise-Clarke, *Museum Representations of Motherhood and the Maternal: Mother Stuff*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2024, hardback £54.99; paperback £21.99, pp.109.

Michelle Millar Fisher and Amber Winick, *Designing Motherhood: Things that Make and Break Our Births*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021, hardback £36, pp.344.

Glorified images of the Virgin Mary have been visible in Western art museums practically since their inception. However, representations of mothers' labour – both giving birth and child-rearing – have lacked visibility in museums. Two recent books that begin with this premise are *Museum Representations of Motherhood and the Maternal: Mother Stuff* by Rebecca Louise-Clarke and *Designing Motherhood: Things that Make and Break Our Births* by Michelle Millar Fisher and Amber Winick. Both books are linked to exhibitions, the former using exhibits as examples and the latter serving as a catalogue. The authors acknowledge that their topic is multifaceted and can be presented from multiple perspectives, for instance, in terms of the history of motherhood; the technical innovations that have transformed giving birth; the designs accompanying parenting; and artistic depictions of labour and child-rearing. However, the books also differ significantly. Louise-Clarke's book is part of the Routledge Focus series and thus bound by strict length limits, while the other text is more expansive. Ultimately, the works complement each other, though one has more serious drawbacks than the other, as I explain below.

Louise-Clarke asserts, 'I identified a problem in museums: the invisibility of mothers' labour and experiences' (3), thus addressing both meanings of the word *labour*. They draw a useful distinction between motherhood as an institution and mothering as an action or process.¹ This argument and others are buttressed by an impressive array of theorists and practitioners who write on museums, feminism, and/or motherhood, including Gilles Deleuze, David Fleming, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Griselda Pollock, and Sara Ruddick. The first of the main chapters proposes that 'maternal voices', narratives of mothers' lived experiences, are largely absent from museums. As a solution, Louise-Clarke suggests that museums adopt strategies such as oral histories and nonlinear narratives to present specifics of individual lives. The second major chapter focuses on objects related to mothering. Following scholars who have shown how these technologies render racial and gender minorities invisible, Louise-Clarke discusses how significance assessments and digital cataloguing systems with limited keywords obscure the varied nature of mothers' work. The section on Lenka Clayton's artwork, *63 Objects from My Son's Mouth*, 2013, is especially strong in drawing attention to items that might be deemed insignificant by curators, even though they are important to mothers. The final major chapter recommends design strategies for successful exhibitions on the emotional and physical labour of mothers. Soundscapes, digital exhibitions, and anecdotes receive mention. In closing, Louise-Clarke offers a 'manifesto' (91) or summation of their beliefs.

Every chapter includes specific exhibitions, and these discussions are amongst the strongest in the book. Details on the Museum of Motherhood (MoM) in Florida and the *WWI: Love and Sorrow* exhibition at Museums Victoria are particular helpful in supporting arguments based on an almost too broad array of theories, which makes reading some of the text heavy slogging

For all its strengths, this book has notable drawbacks. The first relates to definitions:

terms such as *matrescence* and *motherhood* are outlined, but there are contradictions when gender comes into play. The author asserts that mothers need not be women, that they write on the 'lived experiences of mothering that are not exclusively tied to sex, gender, or the maternal body' (8). However, Louise-Clarke repeatedly cites others who refer to mothers as women. For example, they comment that 'the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman' (24), but a few sentences later, they note that 'mothers are oppressed under patriarchy as women and as mothers'. Further slippage in categorization is evident in the fact that many objects discussed - baby blankets, toys, booties - relate more to children than to mothers, though admittedly they have significance for the latter.

The title suggests that the book will focus on representations, though much of the text addresses how mothers could be more welcome in museums, which is a somewhat different topic. Notably, discussion of the Virgin Mary, the most common Western museums' representation of mothers, is absent.

Particularly disappointing is the editorial work on the book, which does the author a disservice. This ranges from an excessive number of surface errors to repetition and poor indexing. Readers encounter their first glaring error with the misspelling of *graffiti* in the frontispiece – it comes off as *graffti*. In another place, the author refers to the next chapter, when in fact the comment is about the following *section* within the chapter (23). Several quotations were used twice within this short book, and when I looked them up, only one use of each quotation appeared in the index (see, for example, quotations by Laurajane Smith on pages 20 and 59, as well as by Sara Ruddick on pages 2 and 75). Finally, wordiness in such a short book reduces possibilities for a full and complex discussion of the author's worthwhile subject.

Louise-Clarke's analyses might have been stronger if they had cited *Designing Motherhood*, which appeared several years earlier. *Designing Motherhood* was written by curators with greater access to relevant objects as well as a larger budget for images and lengthier text. Their audience is somewhat different as well; they are not explicitly addressing museum workers. The book accompanies an eponymous exhibition, which has been travelling in the USA and elsewhere; I saw it in Stockholm, where it had been given a local spin. The first breast pump was a Swedish invention, and this point was highlighted.

The book and exhibition were exhilarating. Both fill a gap similar to the one identified by Louise-Clarke. According to Alexandra Lange, author of the foreword, 'motherhood was a field hiding in plain sight, obscured by its own ubiquity and sidelined by everyday sexism. The famous innovators of motherhood were more often medical men than people who parented, including Dr. Benjamin Spock' (10). The authors refer to the invisibility of the topic in art museums, noting that the Smithsonian and specialized collections have done better:

Nowhere in the nearly nine decades during which MoMA (the Museum of Modern Art in New York) has been collecting and displaying design in all its most innovative forms have any designs related to human reproduction, pregnancy, or birth from the perspectives of women-identifying or trans people been included (19).

A more specific impetus for the book and exhibition was MoMA's refusal to exhibit a breast pump in an exhibition on important innovations (24, note 9), spurring the author/curators to create their own show. Moreover, the level of detail in the book is such that even the most educated person is likely to learn something about motherhood. While theory is not the primary aim of this text, scholarly work is cited when necessary.

As in *Museum Representations of Motherhood and the Maternal*, the introduction lays out key terms, including *motherhood*, and it complicates the definition of *women*, which is used in 'historical instances, for example to denote specific experiences of gender discrimination' (18). Elsewhere, however, the authors use gender-neutral terms – mostly *person*. The authors' intention to work beyond traditional definitions is evident in the inclusion of an interview with Thomas Beatie, who gave birth to a son. Descriptions and images of objects are accompanied by quotations from oral histories, anecdotes, and other texts (Fisher and Winick do not theorize extensively on the importance of oral histories and anecdotes to maternal experiences, however). The book's prose is sprightly; the focus is clear, and over one hundred objects are presented, divided into sections on reproduction, pregnancy, birth, and postpartum. A small drawback is that the thoroughness of the book seems to have led

to the use of minuscule print.

Each section is thorough and interdisciplinary. While the primary emphasis is on the USA, objects from a range of cultures and countries are presented. Among them are Sweden, China, the Netherlands, and India, as well as the UK. The section on reproduction includes media depictions of pregnancy, the pill, intrauterine devices, the speculum, the abuse of sterilization, test tube babies, and stirrups, among other topics. The chapter on pregnancy begins with the home pregnancy test – a liberating innovation – but also addresses sonograms, amniocentesis, pregnancy clothes, midwifery (including an interview with Indigenous practitioners), birth by those identifying as male, stillbirths, baby showers, and gender reveal celebrations. Some of the items in the section on birth are predictable – forceps, hospital bags, birthing chairs, fetal monitors, placentas, and thalidomide. Yet there are also intriguing parts in this section: for instance, the authors directly address the pain of childbirth, and they offer an interview with a doctor who develops simulations of perineal tear repair to improve medical training. This innovation has the potential to improve the lives of thousands, the ‘around one-third of all postpartum people in the UK and US requiring stitches after childbirth’ (221). Finally, the postpartum section, which begins with Dr. Spock’s (in)famous guide for parents, features everything from breast pumps and nursing bras to nannies, family leave, and adoption.

This robust text is supported by a list of selected readings, an ample index, as well as short biographies of contributors and artists. This material, together with the numerous interviews and quotations, supports the authors’ assertion that they wish to partake of a ‘larger conversation on design development, activism, and policy change’ (23).

The authors of these two books on motherhood and the museum agree that ‘the material culture of human reproduction matters. It should matter to everyone. We all share the universal circumstance of having been born’ (Fisher and Winick, 10). For those seeking a quick understanding of the major similarities and differences between the books, one might say that the authors of both books would be interested in a breast pump for its role in mothers’ lives. However, Louise-Clarke would focus more on the work of parenting, while Millar and Fisher would present it in terms of design, noting that it was labour-saving. In both cases, however, these authors address a significant and glaring gap in the history of museum exhibitions and the scholarship that examines them.

Notes

¹ For clarity and consistency, I refer to all three authors with gender-neutral pronouns.