

RE-APPROPRIATING MOTHERING

The experience of motherhood in European cultures has been defined by men. Through creation stories, mythologies and laws, men's versions of motherhood were embedded and reinforced in symbolic representations. From the ancient Greeks to Spock and later, "motherhood-theories" have been promulgated to be internalized and enacted by women. Many women want to reappropriate motherhood from nostalgic, envious, voyeuristic and/or misogynous male definitions and are developing new forms of inquiry and representation true to our own experiences.

Rather than describe "having children" as a remote and static phenomenon, women are likely to define "mothering" as an on-going mutable relationship: not as an "18 year contract," but as both an arduous and gratifying life-long commitment.

Society imposes great difficulties on single mothers. As late as 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women Report referred to them only in relation to the children's fathers--as "widows," "deserted wives" or "unwed" mothers. The Canadian state does little to help such women and their children, 65% of whom live in poverty.

As a college teacher, Judith Crawley knows that she enjoys privileges unavailable to most other female sole parents. She has been able to purchase good child care, appropriate housing, education and recreation for herself and her children. Nonetheless, single mothering is a hard drill. She is on duty 24 hours per day, each day informed by the unspoken yet haunting question: "What if anything happens to me?" The nuclear family is a frail and lonely structure; one cannot always depend on relatives, who may have jobs and may live far away.

By the unsentimental use of image and text, this exhibition records the "everydayness" of raising two children on her own from 1978-1991. In a manner very different from conventionally posed "family photos," Crawley's lens probes the feelings of the children and the affective space they create with her as they play, eat, go to and graduate from school, fight and retreat into their private worlds. She is always present, framing the photo and deciding what should be included--what really matters.

Crawley's camera traces the children's development from her enjoyment of childhood "cuteness" to her angst at adolescent problems. She expresses her ambivalence to child-rearing, at first because of their vulnerability and dependence, and later because she may no longer exercise control over their movements and activities.

Image and text combine to communicate the joys and sorrows of many mothers raising children on their own. A sub-theme concerns the ambivalence she and the children feel towards their father. Like many mothers in her situation, she must address contradictory feelings towards the absent father, a man to be both vilified and romanticized.

Like many of us, she wouldn't have missed mothering for the world. Sometimes, when the children gaze unobstructedly into the camera's eye, she can't imagine wanting them to leave home. She is, however, on the verge of entering uncharted territory: the mothering of and being mothered by adult children.

Greta Hofmann Nemiroff

Joint Chair of Women's Studies, Carleton University/University of Ottawa

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