As Michelle Walks and Naomi McPherson note in their useful four field introduction to this edited volume, while mothering increasingly features in anthropological studies, comprehensive edited volumes and journal issues as well as thorough ethnographic monographs of contemporary mothering or parenting are still in their nascent phase. This volume seeks to serve as a contribution to and catalyst for this inchoate field. Refusing to define the term mothering, the editors instead draw attention to the difference between the act of “mothering” and the role or identity of “motherhood,” noting that the focus on “mothering” opens up the possibilities for actors other than those strictly defined as “mothers” and gendered as female. “Mothering,” they write, “is about biology and culture, bodies and being. Moreover, mothering is practiced by more than just mothers” (p. 19, their emphasis). Yet, as we so often find, women are the most common inhabitants of mothering roles in this volume and cross-culturally.

Despite the documented need for increased scholarship in this arena, the editors and their contributors are anxious to establish what they would call a “motherline” (Miller-Schroeder, p. 67) with previous works in the anthropology of reproduction. In contrast with the edited volumes produced by their foremothers, like Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp’s pioneering Conceiving the New World Order (1995), Walks and McPherson’s volume is more wide ranging, engaging more practices and contexts of mothering; however, this expansiveness also limits the ethnographic depth of each individual chapter, most likely due to chapter length limits. The broad swath of chapters range from mother-daughter relationships to mothers’ engagements with health and wellness to the ways in which women are empowered through mothering in socio-cultural contexts including Brazil, Toronto, Massachusetts, China, and Australia. In this way, this volume certainly builds on those earlier feminist studies of reproduction, but also seeks to narrow the focus to an examination of mothering itself.

The importance of the motherline is also evident in the reflexive and intersubjective nature of many of these chapters, where the “I” often takes a prominent role. This is often because the largely female contributors are themselves grappling with their own experiences as mothers. In Shubhangi Vaidya’s chapter on Indian mothers of children with autism, her own experience as the mother of an autistic son informs her ethnography. Likewise, in Kelly Dombroski’s opening chapter, she chronicles her “awkward engagements” with a close friend and informant who is raising a child in difficult circumstances at the same time that Dombroski herself raises her own child. The moments of “friction” (Tsing 2004) where different mothering practices run up against each other produce these awkward but nonetheless productive engagements. In this case, Dombroski is concerned with how her friend Xiao Shi, a mother of an infant living in poverty in urban China, takes up or rejects elements of “North American” or “Western” childrearing practices as they are represented by an American parenting book Xiao
Shi owns and by Dombroski herself. She suggests that Xiao Shi’s simultaneous “horror” and “fascination” with Western parenting practices epitomizes the awkward engagements of the contemporary global condition played out on an intimate, interpersonal scale.

The chapters in the volume introduce myriad complexities to the ways that mothering is imagined, but nurturance, care, love, and cultural continuity, all of which are often deified components of mothering cross-culturally, are still featured conspicuously in the contributions. In her chapter on soldiers’ mothers in Turkey, Senem Kaptan writes that “mothering does not necessarily promise life, nor does it always provide protection for the children who are at risk” (p. 260), an important insight often missing from the literature on mothering (cf. Scheper-Hughes 1992). Yet, the mothers described in this book seem profoundly concerned with the provision of life and the protection from risk in a global economy where uncertainty and anxiety abound. Thus, in Alanna E.F. Rudzik’s chapter on breastfeeding among low-income women in Brazil, mothers who are not promoted as the ideal “good” mother – whether because they are poor or very young – reposition themselves as “good” mothers by breastfeeding their children. These women explain their infant feeding method as the “best” not only because it is biomedically validated but also because it is considered a source of “warmth” and especially “love.”

In the effort to complicate ideological – and idealized – representations of mothering, the most effective section of the book is the concluding one entitled “Mothering in the Shadows.” In this section, the editors and contributors rightly draw attention to the logics, both implicit and institutionalized, that structure mothering in relation to the state and political economy. The title references both the notion of “shadow motherhood” (p. 270), where mothering duties are performed but simultaneously obscured, and the shadow economy, which operates outside of, but is inextricably bound to, the legitimate economy. Like the “shadow mothering” of au pairs in Chicago (Schultes, Chapter 16), the shadow economy at times props up the legitimate economy. Yet, for those involved in such an economy, like the women described in Monica Tarducci’s chapter on adoption in Misiones Province, Argentina, and in Susan Sered and Maureen Norton-Hawk’s chapter on criminalized mothers in the U.S., the more significant concern in terms of effectively mothering their children is their own intersection with the state and its criminal apparatus. Thus, Tarducci describes an adoption process from the points of view of both adopting parents and of those women who are giving up their babies for adoption that is “legal but illegitimate” in the media’s representation. The media decries “child trafficking,” forcing participants to engage in significant discursive work to legitimate their adoption and their mothering. Meanwhile, the formerly incarcerated mothers described in Sered and Norton-Hawk’s chapter might be considered both “illegal” and “illegitimate” in the eyes of the state, but nevertheless engage in mothering work as they seek to gain access to their children in foster care, arrange for their children’s care, or simply properly nurture the children currently in their care.

In terms of exposing the reader to so many intimate views of mothering cross-culturally, this volume is undoubtedly essential reading for anyone working in reproduction, parenting, and childhood studies and might serve as an effective textbook for a course on reproduction and parenthood or even feminist social science research. Because the volume focuses so heavily on women and mothers, it would be advisable to supplement this reading with texts on men’s reproductive issues and fathering practices. The latter is undoubtedly the next frontier for a feminist anthropology of reproduction.
Author Biography: Anna Jaysane-Darr is a lecturer at Fitchburg State University and Newbury College. She received her Ph.D. in socio-cultural anthropology from Brandeis University in May 2013. Her dissertation, “National Bodies: Raising South Sudanese in America,” addresses childrearing and citizenship practices among South Sudanese former refugees.

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