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### Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country

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Jennifer Brown,  
University of British  
Columbia Press, 1980,  
291 pp., hardcover \$24.  
Jacqueline Gresko

Jennifer Brown, an anthropologist, has used archival sources to study a long-neglected topic in the history of frontier North America — fur trade company family life in the 1700s and 1800s. Her discussion, although long and complex is of interest to general readers as well as university professors.

The title, *Strangers in Blood*, though puzzling in itself indicates the main themes of her work. The laws of Britain imposed a 10 per cent duty 'on the legacies of all heirs who were natural children or "strangers in blood" to a deceased party.' In North American fur trade territory, lack of religious and civil institutions meant that fur traders formed alliances with native women according to the custom of the country rather than by official marriage rites. Many of these country wives and their children had to go to court to prove their legitimacy in order to claim their inheritance. For Brown, 'strangers in blood' has a double meaning: this legal description of 'any relationship, even familial that the law refused to admit as legitimate [:]' and 'one way of characterizing the meetings of Whites and

Indians . . . in the fur trade of North America.'

Brown's main points about these interracial encounters may be summarized as follows. Before 1821, despite 'their common British (and heavily Scottish) facade' the rival London-based Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and Montreal-based North West Company developed different types of social organizations in Indian country. Though men of both companies married Indian women 'according to the custom of the country', the HBC traders with their permanent residential posts formed stable social units and sought to bring education and civilization to their families. The North Westers were frequently transferred, had temporary arrangements with native women, and 'followed their personal inclinations with regard to their families.' After the coalition of the two fur trade companies in 1821, the traders and their families underwent the pressures of the reorganization of the fur trade by the economy-minded Governor George Simpson. Also armies of missionaries and settlers advanced into fur trade country. They, like Simpson, tended to denigrate native families. Brown contends that, within the new HBC, social distinctions between gentlemen and servants, between white and native, were 'strongly related to changing economic pressures'. Old HBC men, the traders with strong family loyalties and large kinship networks on the frontier, defended their country-born children. They tried to educate and place both their daughters and their sons in British or Canadian society. In the long run, they had more success in securing the positions of their married daughters, especially in the Northwest where country-

born women were still the majority of educated women of marriageable age. By contrast the old North Westers tended 'not to assume an active paternal role'. Their children remained in the Northwest as halfbreeds or Metis and 'emphasized their maternal descent.'

While *Strangers in Blood* is an important book, it will be a difficult one for the student or the general reader to follow. It is still too much in the form of the academic thesis. It is complicated by seemingly insignificant bits of anthropological theory. This is perhaps a function of the anthropological system of references used in the book. That eliminates the need for long footnotes but it transfers the clutter of scholarly discussion to the text.

Modern women fighting for Indian rights for Indian women are interested in the legal cases concerning Brown's strangers in blood. Though Brown does not mention the study Kathleen Jamieson did for them *Indian Women and the Law in Canada: Citizens Minus*, (1978), she, like Jamieson refers to the Connolly case of 1869. According to Jamieson it 'established the legal validity of such marriages and indeed was held as a precedent for establishing the validity of all customary marriages until 1951.' Perhaps Indian Rights for Indian Women and Jamieson and Brown could cooperatively edit the records of the case for publication. And, since one of fur trader William Connolly's country born children was Amelia, the consort of Sir James Douglas, father of British Columbia, the University of British Columbia Press should be happy to assist with the project.

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### Becoming a Mother

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Ann Oakley,  
Martin Robertson & Co.  
Ltd.: 1979, 328pp., \$19.95.  
Judith Posner

Ann Oakley's new book on motherhood is a strange sort of academic text. In fact, one can hardly call it a sociological study or analysis in the traditional sense of the term. It is comprised almost exclusively of verbatim quotes transcribed from 66 in-depth tape interviews with urban, middle class and working class women in England. The book is structured around a variety of sub-themes such as the childbirth experience, baby feeding and domestic politics. Aside from its organization and a few sparing remarks by the author interspersed throughout, the book is true to the belief that socio-psychological issues are best understood if the participants or actors are permitted to speak for themselves. And, in *Becoming a Mother*, they do so quite eloquently.

I think probably more and more I've realized how women do get taken for granted. For example, when Howard and I go out shopping and he wants a drink on the way home, we sit in the pub and he might meet a couple of friends and sometimes I get the feeling that they're not interested in me: I'm just his wife and I've got a baby and I'm not a person. p.271.

Perhaps their perceptions are even more powerful because Oakley avoids the addition of extended analytic elaborations, even though it is quite clear that she must have edited and organized her data with great care and empathy. (Oakley is married and has three children). In this respect, her recent study is quite similar to her

previously published research on housework, *The Sociology of Housework*, 1974 which has become a staple in Women's Studies courses. Although the latter text does not rely quite so heavily on verbatim quotes, it is also an excellent phenomenological study of the female experience. In fact, what is surprising about both of these research projects is not merely the subjective or experiential perspective which Oakley brings to her material, but also her choice of material in the first place. She not only avoids jargon and the unnecessary longwindedness that is part and parcel of academic prose, but she focuses on unusual behavioural themes that most other researchers ignore.

Why women have avoided the analysis of topics which seem most central to the female experience is an issue raised by Oakley herself in the introduction to her 1974 study. It is also the focus of an excellent article which appeared recently in *Ms.* by Barbara Ehrenrich, 'How to get Housework Out of Your System'. Ehrenrich traces the topic of housework historically. She contends that women have waffled between feeling it is either too trivial to be discussed or so difficult that it should be rewarded with wages on par with men's jobs, i.e., Wages for Housework. It is difficult to discredit her contention that the subject of housework has been inadequately investigated by feminist writers.

Feminist theory had analyzed sexuality down to the last nerve ending, but when it came to housework, we retreated into abstractions . . . . Why did there seem to be a taboo on any serious experiential analysis of housework? (p.49) *Ms. Magazine*, October 1979.

The topic of motherhood seems to fall prey to the same syndrome of

avoidance. It is a strange thing to realize that the recent wave of feminism has probably produced more books on rape than it has on motherhood. Perhaps feminists would like to believe that women have more important things to think about than mothering and housework, but the reality of our social scene is that these spheres are still the significant ones for most women. In this respect, Oakley is one of the few intellectually honest researchers and writers who does not deny her gender and writes from the gut up. *Becoming a Mother* is highly recommended from this vantage point.

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### With Child

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*Phyllis Chesler,  
Thomas Crowell  
Pub. New York: 1979  
288 pages, \$12.95  
Judith Posner*

As a new mother — and as a woman who did not begin childbearing 'til after 30 — I have been anxiously awaiting the arrival of Phyllis Chesler's new book in Canada. Unfortunately, after rushing over to the Toronto Women's Bookstore to get my copy, I can't help but feel disappointed. In fact, after reading it twice, I am convinced that there are many mothers who have far more to say on the subject, but who would, of course, be hard pressed to find a publisher.

For those unfamiliar with the book's history, Phyllis Chesler gave birth to a baby boy in January, 1978. In fact, during the first few months of her baby Ariel's life, she is on the road promoting the book and, not surprisingly, she expresses some (but not very much) conflict on the matter. The book is a diary of motherhood. It claims to be 'an

intimate account of pregnancy, childbirth and mothering'. But it is not really as intimate as one would expect. The entries are brief — sometimes only a few lines. The book's 300 pages are, in reality, only half that. Her diary is not the intricate expressions of one's inner thoughts and fantasies. They are mere snippets, summaries of her psychic life. We learn little about the depth of her despair or joy because there is simply not enough detail. For example, she barely begins to express the agony she must feel about spending so little time with her newborn. Can it be that she feels so little regret or guilt? Or perhaps she is merely tired, underestimating her own lack of energy after childbirth, so that she is not really ready to undertake the task she sets for herself here. Chesler intimates as much in the preface to a pathetic bibliography which appears at the end of the book.

A bibliographic survey of all the writing during the last ten thousand years about the experience and consequence of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood doesn't exist. I lacked the time — the precious time — to create one. (p. 285)

The second shortcoming of the book is its tone. It is personal, but in a contrived, righteous sort of way. The writing style is archaic and stilted.

If you only knew how lately from childbed I've risen. (p. 148)

And so is the photograph on the back cover which features a very posed and deadly serious Chesler with her similarly unsmiling son. The title *With Child* is similarly pretentious, thus making Chesler sound more like

a Victorian suffragette than a contemporary feminist writer. She tends to validate such assertions when she confesses in her diary how much she agonized over the book's title.

Naming this book is harder than naming you, Ariel. (p.274).

In short, the book lacks the tedious down to earth treatment that such a topic requires.

Still more surprising, underlying the pompous tone which pervades the diary is an air of naïveté. One gets the feeling that Chesler never thought about any of these issues before and this is disturbing indeed. For example, she seems shocked to find that the child care problem really does exist. Or that children and breastfeeding mothers are not really welcome in public places. She is indignant when she realizes

... there is no place to change an infant in a public bathroom . . . . Come to think of it, have I ever seen a baby-changing station in a movie theater, a night club, an office building? (p. 149)

Although one is forced to agree with millions of mothers who tried to warn us that 'you never really know until you've been there', Chesler writes as though she never had an inkling. Is this possible from the woman who authored *Women and Madness*?

Chesler's diary also suffers from a lack of perspective. There is only a hint of humour here, suggesting that she is still too much a victim of her predicament to write about it. She isn't sufficiently detached from the experience to reflect on it meaningfully. She implies that this could be the case when she suggests that there are certain economic pressures motivating her writing of the book.