Shani Orgad

Book review: mothering through precarity: women's work and digital media

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Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim. Mothering through Precarity: Women's work and Digital Media. Duke University Press: London and Durham, 2017, 216 pp.

Reviewed by Shani Orgad, London School of Economics and Political Science

Mothering is a deeply meaningful, valuable, significant, as well as pleasurable activity, but, as feminist scholars have consistently emphasized, it is simultaneously complex, laborious, precarious and profoundly undervalued. *Mothering through Precarity* highlights how advanced neoliberalism and, particularly, the privatization of risk and the intensification of self-regulation and "disciplinary neoliberalism" (Gill, 1995), inject new layers of complexity and difficulty into mothers' work and reconfigure maternal sensibilities in profound ways. The book explores how mothers' lives are entangled with digital media as they tirelessly try to hold their families together in response to the insecurities of advanced neoliberalism. Animated by a strong commitment to attend to the intricate relationship between gender, digital media and everyday life, Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim conducted in-depth interviews with 29 working-class and middle-class mothers from the hard-hit Rust Belt in Pennsylvania. Drawing on these interviews and other ethnographic data, the book looks at the ways "mothers come to absorb the punishing tides of advanced neoliberalism at the level of everyday life," (2) as well as how this process is exacerbated and enacted within and through these women's use of digital media.

Inviting their readers into the everyday and often exhausting lives of the mothers they interviewed, Wilson and Chivers Yochim show how, as safety nets, social security and public infrastructures that historically have propped up nuclear family life, are continuously eroded, mothers come to inhabit the "precarious ordinary" – a notion they borrow from Kathleen Stewart (2007) in order to shift the focus from economic security to precariousness as a structure of feeling or sensibility. This sensibility compels these mothers to assume increasing material and emotional responsibility for their families' well-being, security and happiness. The author show how the mamasphere – a network of mommy blogs, corporate websites addressed to mothers, social media platforms and mothering online communities – provides mothers with a host of tools, venues and technologies to cope with the mounting insecurities that have enveloped their families.

At the same time, the mamasphere crucially serves to help privatize these women's families' happiness and resilience, through, for instance, the remaking of hardships into happy stories on display on Facebook or mommy blogs.

Chapter 1 looks at how mothers' lives have been overloaded affectively by liberal and neoliberal regimes of family governmentality and by shifting discourses of "good mothering". The authors show how digital networks, such as the popular website for expecting and new mothers BabyCenter, with which the mothers they studied engage, offer women numerous tools and techniques to self-monitor their parenting and render it calculable and controllable. On the one hand, these digital media induce and exacerbate mothers' self-governance, engendering new affective loads and high levels of anxiety. At the same time, participating in and using these digital platforms offer the women meaningful communication, information and, crucially, affirmation, so lacking within the increasing insecurity in their lives, especially around economic security and access to health care.

Chapter 2 then goes on to focus on what the authors dub "mamapreneurialism" as the primary sensibility of the mothers they studied. It entails a constant orientation towards stabilizing, optimizing, protecting and insuring their families, while constantly working to elevate their families' lives above the risks and threats of the precarious everyday. We meet mothers who employ various strategies for stabilizing and securitizing their families, such as online couponing and small business ventures they run from platforms such as Get Life, as well as digital tools that help them self-monitor, optimize and responsibilize their families (e.g., My Job Chart). However, while digital media enable women to perform this "security work" (Cooper, 2014), the mamaspehere, with its ever-flowing possibilities, simultaneously intensifies the exploitation of women's caring labour.

Chapter 3 shows how the mamasphere figures as a crucial affective infrastructure for mothers. Looking at mothers who blog and who engage in social media in mundane ways – for instance, by snapping family photos and posting them to Facebook and Instagram. Chapter 3 highlights how these spaces provide women with affirmative and inspirational venues that help them make their lives feel liveable and brimming with happy potential, for example, by letting them vent their frustrations and transform them

into positive affect. However, these online affective infrastructures also produce intense labour, demanding these mothers constantly to tune their affects and capacities to the promise of their families' happiness.

Following the first three chapters, which emphasize women's highly individualized engagement in the privatization of their families' happiness, Chapter 4 is an interesting surprise, highlighting the modes of collectivity in which the mothers engage. Exploring an offline Christian mothering network and an online mothering community, this chapter looks at how mothers come together to take on the work of privatizing happiness. The authors call this "individualized solidarities", an oxymoron that seeks to account for how, through these online and offline maternal communities, mothers help each other and share their loads, engendering resiliency nets as the other social safety nets around them fray. However, drawing on Berlant (2011), whose work animates the book, the researchers ultimately claim that these "individualized solidarities" are cruel: they keep mothers attached and invested in securing the happiness of their families and, thus, invested in growing loads and social responsibilities, "tethered to the horizons of neoliberal precarity" (140) without the capacity to imagine alternatives.

In the book's conclusion, the authors draw/invoke on Sara Ahmed's (2010) germinal critique of happiness, highlighting the cruelly optimistic fashion in which the mothers they studied remain stuck to family happiness and how this blocks out alternative sensibilities. They call into question the notion of family autonomy, in which not only the mothers they studied are deeply invested, but also, they argue, a great deal of scholarship on family and motherhood as well as political discourse. Wilson and Chivers Yochim call for a "new configuration of care and collectivity" (179), which the mothers they studied yearn for but seem unable to imagine. However, the authors do not suggest what this alternative configuration might entail and, crucially, the wider conditions and structures that would have to be challenged and transformed for it to be imagined let alone realized.

However, having read this fascinating account, I was left with a profound a question: where is patriarchy? The researchers explain that their goal was to show how the "indisputable" pull that mothers feel for their families is "subject to assemblages of power (not simply patriarchy)" (171). Yet this bracketing of patriarchy and its prefacing

with the adverb "simply" overlooks the fundamental entanglement of neoliberalism with patriarchy.

The almost complete absence of critical attention to patriarchy is perhaps most clearly manifest in the very limited sense the readers get of the women's marriages and their roles as wives. These women not only facilitate and prop up their children's happiness, but also—and crucially—their husbands'. For example, in Chapter 2 we meet Caroline, a middle-class woman, whose husband's work involves extremely long hours, a reality that she painfully confesses took her ten years to adjust to and that continues to make her "incredibly depressed" (85). Yet, exhibiting a mamapreneurial sensibility, Caroline utilizes the tools of privatizing happiness and refocuses on appreciating the family by, for example, taking dinner to her husband's workplace, and "relentlessly scheduling activities with her girls to experience togetherness" (86) (without their father). The embrace of mamapreneurialism by women like Caroline seems to cover up the huge sacrifices they have made and continue to make as wives as well as mothers, cementing the dual forces that constantly circumscribe mothering and curb female desire: neoliberalism *and* patriarchy.

Despite this significant gap, *Mothering through Precarity* is a profound and critical contribution to the study of what Rosalind Gill (2017) and Christina Scharff (2016) call the affective and psychic life of neoliberalism. The study exposes how neoliberal technologies of self, such as happiness (Davies 2015), resilience (Gill and Orgad, forthcoming), and confidence (Gill and Orgad, 2015), which are highly gendered, penetrate mothers' psyches and intimate lives. With genuine empathy and care for their interviewees, Wilson and Chivers Tochim show how mothers are caught up in the forces of precarization that threaten their families, and how they turn to the digital mamasphere to resist the turbulences of advanced neoliberalism. However, in the very process of resisting, these women internalize and cultivate "neoliberal rationality" (Brown 2015).

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