Book Review

Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim. Mothering Through Precarity: Women's Work and Digital Media. *Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.*

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In a recent interview published in conjunction with the exhibition *Our Happy Life: Architecture and Well-Being in the Age of Emotional Capitalism* produced by the Canadian Center for Architecture, Wendy Chun and Orit Halpern (2019) exchange ideas on the measuring of happiness by the state and the emotion economy. By quantifying their citizens' emotional well-being, governments presuppose that there is a correlation between public policies and happiness production. Starting from the interpretation that "happiness is a question of luck," Halpern suggests that this correlation enforces a democratization of probability and resiliency by encouraging people to take risks in becoming happily successful. Thus, a happy individual is one that is resilient to precarity and flexible enough to adapt to a fast-changing, unpredictable environment.

As the bearers of future citizens, mothers are particularly affected by these unstable grounds, on which they have to navigate while feeding their families with hopes for happy lives. In *Mothering Through Precarity. Women's Work and Digital Media*, Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim present an ethnographic study and media analysis of the role played by digital media in contemporary mothering, as working and middle-class mothers face emotional and financial precarity. This collective research effort brings together each scholar's personal and professional experiences: Emily's as a feminist media ethnographer and mother, and Julie's as a "happily child free" scholar working on women's work, neoliberalism and digital media. Inspired by feminist audience studies and radical contextualism, the book resists separating media from the intersubjective networks and contextual settings of the digital mundane.

Facebook, Pinterest, mommy-blogs, couponing, and health and parenting websites compose what Wilson and Yochim call the "mamasphere," a constellation of online resources and communities supporting mothers experiencing emotional and financial precarity. Targeting two localities from northern Pennsylvania where the poverty rate verges on 30%, these postindustrial districts experience abrupt demographic and economic mutations as they get propelled into the service economy. Although they cannot speak for all mothers—most of the participants being white, middle-class, heteronormative mothers—Wilson and Yochim affirm that the collected testimonies proffer a glimpse of the day-to-day reality of *some* women and illuminate the "silence and gaps" of everyday gendered life.

In the first chapter, the authors explore how mothers' lives get affectively *loaded up* by family autonomy and the *government of mothers*—moms' self-reflexive work and affective management. "Good mothers must be happy mothers,"

but paradoxically they are also expected to get around the dissatisfactions and anxieties triggered by the inevitable friction between individualization and normalization of the nuclear family. Taking inspiration from Ana Villalobo's ethnographic study *Motherload*, the authors argue that neoliberalism *intensifies* mothering as it is based on the expectation that family security is contingent on mothers. In other words, mothers must carry the burden of multiple loads in order to protect their family's sovereignty and privatized happiness in a recessional economy.

In the second chapter, the authors explain how precarity forces mothers to rehabilitate their family as a "rationalized web of economized care" for the promise of a secure life. Activities and initiatives taken by mothers in this aim are defined by the concept of "mamapreneurialism" and the figure of the "mamapreneur." Their interpretation of contemporary mothering as *business* adds to recent critiques of the rationalization and quantification of happiness and the financialization of daily life. Happiness becomes a family enterprise where the mother is the boss and consequently, must release anything that interferes with rationalized, optimized output—weaknesses, anxieties, pessimistic mindsets—outside of the family sphere.

In chapter 3, Wilson and Yochim explore the networks of support used by mothers as digital users in the mamasphere. As they underline, these banal entanglements of digital media and daily life can concurrently exacerbate and alleviate mother loads. The authors deconstruct these digital entanglements into three sections—the "charge," the "commune," and "code and recode"—to indicate how the mamasphere forges a network of affects that feed into resilient happiness. As they present it, the mamasphere *charges* women's mundane activities with affective punches such as project ideas, entertaining games, online courses, blogging and vibrant exchanges of comments and posts. On the down-side, these communities of users rest on the free digital labor of mothers in order to stay active and vigilant. Paradoxically, these vital sharing platforms add another point of pressure on women, since they must bear the weight of

digital labor in hope of a sense of community. In addition, participation on those platforms *converts* the events of the everyday into an infinite spectrum of "happy potentialities": any instant can be remediated through the lens and filters of digital media as a "happy" moment. The laughable example of "happy vacuuming" is at the very least, telling of the desperate need for aesthetic, insightful moments.

The erosion of social structures and public services is pushing mothers to become resilient, not only for themselves but for the prospects of humanity. The fourth chapter presents collective modes of mothering as *individualized solidarities*, where the aim of collectivity is to privatize happiness through resiliency nets. In the introduction, Wilson and Yochim provide a fascinating overview of the 20th century mothering support groups and media productions, such as La Leche League and their *Womanly Art of Breastfeeding* (1958) book. Despite the briefness of this historical segment—which could have benefitted of a more significant role within this chapter—, the correlation between the early stages of neoliberalism and the government of mothers is well demonstrated as they move on to two contemporary communities: the Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS), a grassroots international Christian organization for the self-education and guidance of mothers; and Momastery, an international online community of support led by mom microcelebrity Glennon Doyle. This comparative analysis makes clear that by encouraging mothers to become leaders, not only in the nucleus of family, but throughout various nodes of the mamasphere, these affective infrastructures induce a tolerance of precarity. By politicizing motherhood through the government of mothers, neoliberal systems propagate depoliticized resiliency and thus shut off any possibility for alternative ways of being.

But is family autonomy immutable? The authors suggest otherwise in their final interview with Nancy, a young mother of one child working full-time time as an administrative assistant, struggling with physical and emotional exhaustion. The interview captures the way in which Nancy's strategy for family happiness is in

contradiction with her own personal happiness scripts. Even with her anchored heteronormative gender assumption, she appears to be drifting to the edge of "affective alienation," a concept gleaned from feminist writer and scholar Sara Ahmed. Affect aliens resist imposed conventions of happiness, they accept it neither as a social norm nor as a social good; instead, they are those who are "alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the world," whether it be negative or positive. Drawing from Jean-Luc Nancy's definition of *happenstance*, the unpredictable and contingent nature of events that makes the world how it is, Ahmed suggests that affect aliens embrace chance, let go of the obsession of happiness and let the "hap" happen. Wilson and Yochim make a solid claim by calling to "new sensibilities," above ideological critique and official policies, to recode our communities of care. Although they limit their example of new family structures to cohousing, their conclusion opens up a network of potentialities beyond family unity. Ultimately, new sensibilities will feed into new consciousness of race, class and gender to extend collective resources to those who are pushed to the margins of neoliberalism.

Overall, Wilson and Yochim draw up a dejected, disillusioned portrait of motherhood in our neoliberal era, which they recognize as incomplete. At multiple times throughout the book, the authors reiterate that their research focused on the heteronormative nuclear family and their use of digital media. Thus, the potential for extrapolation seems limited. The book could have benefitted from a wider field of vision to encompass the affect aliens that stand at the limit of its framework. More of an unhappy diagnosis than a claim for emancipation, this book rightly testifies of the sturdiness of family autonomy within Western individualized affective economy.

Conclusively, *Mothering Through Precarity* provides a complex, detailed account of the trails and traces of neoliberalism within the routines and affective networks of mothers. The authors offer an original account of their interdisciplinary research where the oscillation between the digital mundane and ethnographic observations is at times out of balance. Still, this work offers a rich synthesis of preceding seminal works in cultural studies and constitutes a significant and ingenious contribution to the field of digital media and gender studies.

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