

## Book Review

Brooke Erin Duffy. (Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

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This special issue of *Synoptique*—dedicated to a diverse range of intersecting questions about the labour of media and/or media labour—would not be complete without a book review of Brook Erin Duffy’s 2017 book *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*. As already noted in reviews by Kait Kribs (2019) and Donna Harrington-Lueker (2019), Duffy’s book has become integral reading for anyone interested in digital media, gender studies and contemporary labour trends. Throughout the book, Duffy uses a sophisticated methodological blend of thorough historical and theoretical analysis along with practical, careful and sensitive primary research to produce an essential commentary on the evolving state of gendered creative work and cultural industry labour trends.

The book is a follow-up of sorts to Duffy’s first book, *Remake, Remodel: Women’s Magazines in the Digital Age* (2013). Within an accelerating landscape of participatory digital media, Duffy’s first book chronicled the evolution of women’s magazines, from their producers, to their audiences, and to their relationships with independent writers. Duffy’s newest book shifts its focus on the contemporary experiences of women digital media creatives. Based on three years of ethnographic fieldwork, Duffy grounds her analysis primarily in her conversations and

interviews with fifty-six social media creatives: bloggers, vloggers, DIY fashion and jewellery designers, online networkers, and street-style photographers. The reigning majority of her 56 interviewees are female, and almost exclusively fashion and lifestyle social media producers. Laid out very clearly in her preface, Duffy’s main methodological interjection is one which allows her project’s research subjects to speak of and through their lived experiences.

Duffy begins her book with a provocative prompt. Citing Mattel’s newest “Entrepreneur Barbie”—who graced the cover of the 2014 *Sports Illustrated*’s 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Swimsuit Issue in a bathing—Duffy gestures towards the increasingly lucrative lure of the contemporary entrepreneur figure in consumer culture. Barbie’s celebration by *Sports Illustration* subsequently draws explicit ties between the mainstreaming discourse of “digital democratizing” and its associated mythology of meritocracy within the fashion and lifestyle creative industries: if Barbie can be a celebrated entrepreneur, so can we. Broadly, Duffy’s book challenges the ever-present “glowing optimism of techno-enthusiasts” (Duffy 2008, x) by providing much-needed critique and detailed historical context of global, economic, and structural transformations within digital media’s “gig economy.” More purposely, she questions the extent to which the

often-self-declared passion projects by these creative labourers are actually “paying off” within a heightening, individualizing, “CEO of Me, Inc.” era.

In Chapter 1, Duffy develops her most significant theoretical intervention within the contemporary scholarship of precarious and gendered digital labour: that of aspirational labour. In overviewing how social media producers *aspire to* succeed, Chapter 1 situates social media content production within a career trajectory where labour and leisure are said to have the opportunity to coexist. Denoted as “a practice and a worker ideology,” Duffy explains how “aspirational labor” is made up mostly of “uncompensated, independent work, propelled by the much-venerated ideal of *getting paid to do what you love*” (Duffy 2017, 41; emphasis in original). Grounded within historically constructed notions of femininity such as community, affect and commodity-based self-expression, aspirational labour is reinforced by the “seductive ideology” of contemporary post-feminist logics of visibility, individual expression and empowerment (11). *(Not) Getting Paid* demonstrates how the pairing of contemporary passion-work with traditional women’s work—journalism, video production, advertising and publicity—continues to (invisibly) propel the engines of capitalism through women’s affective labour.

*(Not) Getting Paid* successfully contributes its meticulously researched and situated gendered lens to recent scholarship about shifting digital media workplace cultures and technologies. Following a research lineage that examines labour trends through carefully developed fieldwork (for example, Baym 2015; Cohen 2016), Duffy interprets her interview data alongside industry field notes and historical inquiry. She also engages theoretical analysis from media studies, gender studies and sociology—an interdisciplinary methodology which has the ability to unravel the complex and influencing layers of a commodifying digital media labour economy. While the digital media industry is propelled by trends in innovation, for example, Duffy’s interdisciplinary methodology demonstrates how, as an industry, it remains largely bounded by trad-

itional gendered workplace and leisure expectations.

In Chapter 2, Duffy traces a lineage of gendered “aspirational consumption.” She turns to representations of women shopping within Victorian and early twentieth-century literature and eventually links their class aspirations to those shared by entrepreneurial women within digital media gig economies. Duffy historicizes the promises of unpaid passion-work within a marketplace that encourages status-induced consumerism and, thus, permits and encourages consumer-based feminine self-expression. For turn-of-the-century women who publicly displayed themselves as fashionable shoppers, aspirational consumerism was a status-symbol projection of “*who the individual may become*” (23; original emphasis). By historically situating today’s so-called digital democratization promises—and their delusions of gendered hierarchies—Duffy explains how a shift from feminized consumption towards cultural production ultimately re-inscribes gendered labour inequalities. Duffy argues that the (digital) media workplace landscape—albeit fragmented through individual start-ups—continues to attract and cluster women in the “pink ghetto”: private, segregated spaces of “promotional or below-the-line” communication jobs (43), through an affective “lifestyle brand” ethos and with endless aspirational promises of personal self-fulfillment and public, professional success.

Arguably, though, Duffy’s rich inter-textual and multi-disciplinary methodological approach is sustained through a debt provided by her subject-centered approach. Throughout *(Not) Getting Paid*, Duffy holds true to two of her main project goals: to uphold the legitimacy attributed to the “passion” work her research subjects generously narrate for her, while also theoretically drawing out important contradictions in their self-descriptions (Duffy 2017, xii). In Chapters 3 and 4—two chapters that heavily interlace digital media labour theorization and subject-centred life stories—Duffy centres these two main goals while simultaneously critiquing the social, economic, political and gendered structures that surround the often-invisible labour of

her interviewees.

Chapter 3 “exposes the deep cracks” in narratives of social media labour, leisure and entrepreneurial amateurism (Duffy 2017, 48). Through her interviewees’ shared experiences, Duffy articulates how these social media aspirants do, in fact, treat their social media work *as* work, but are continually lured to it through its most salient conditions and features, such as: promises for creativity, relationship building in on-and-off-line contexts, and access to various modes of individualized self-expression. However, Duffy pulls a divisive tension between labour and leisure from their origin stories. Julianne, a fashion blogger, for instance, tells Duffy: “The most important thing for bloggers is to have a social presence, and in order to have a social presence ... you really need to be *on*, and ... interacting with people a lot ... one just keep[s] at it [and has to] juggle a life of work, and writing the blog” (70, 96; emphasis in original). Duffy attributes Julianne’s (and others like her) self-branding and self-fashioning to a sort of post-feminist “peacocking” subjectivity, whereby a form of success—or empowerment—is envisioned as possible through commodity visibility. The social media producer (and her body) must be permanently accessible and active and—in the words of Julianne—“always on.” What’s most remarkable about this chapter is how Duffy remains sincere to her chosen subject-centred methodology. She demonstrates she is capable of providing important social media labour critique, while not critiquing the subjects themselves—who, let’s not forget, are willingly re-labouring (likely for free) on behalf of academic research. In this methodological feat, Duffy echoes Nancy Baym’s important reminder to avoid understanding labouring relationships as “inherently either genuine or alienating, empowering or oppressive...they are all of these and more, often at the same time” (79).

Duffy continues to draw out the complexities of relational labour in Chapter 4, asking important questions about the “authenticity brand” of lifestyle social media content production. This chapter explores the contradictions these women are challenged to uphold while overworked and

underpaid, “given that the ‘authenticity’ trope is increasingly compliant with the demands of capitalism” (Duffy 2017, 100). While women—like New York based model and blogger Crystal—sustain their “brands” by being “real,” or “ordinary,” or “just like you or me,” they explain how they must continuously tightrope between concealing and revealing the veneer of their “authenticity brand.” In other words, Crystal creates a cooking brand that is “attainable but also aspirational.” This is a “realness” that Crystal works hard to code as relatable to her imagined audience, and because, as Duffy elaborates, “one’s *creative voice* is synonymous with her commoditized *brand*” (135; original emphasis). Chapter 4’s life stories reveal how the tensions between professional and personal realms simultaneously help these labourers (aspire to) succeed, while also keeping them susceptible to public surveillance, scrutiny, and confined to normalizing visibility tropes of commoditized femininity. Consequently, their eventual ability to profit is made possible through paid sponsorships, but often only *because* of their “successful” ability to leverage their “authenticity brand.”

In Chapter 5, Duffy pushes the contradictions between “staying real” and “selling out” further. In other words, her interviewees discuss the difficulties of actually, publicly, and successfully making a living doing what they love—which eventually means landing a paid corporate sponsorship. Herein lies the tension explored in Duffy’s potentially strongest chapter, which deftly argues that while the digital media landscape has borne many “partnerships” between grassroots bloggers and industry behemoths, these industry arrangements continue to unfairly sustain inequitable “partnership” imbalances. Such industry disparities, Duffy argues, harken back to mid-century, word-of-mouth, multi-level marketing systems (like AVON), which affectively targeted women and their “housewife” communities. While these social media producers *need* these advertisers to get paid, the “partnership” advantages continue to out-favour corporations: a blogger’s “authenticity” brand helps breed a more organic, “influencer” brand for the business, while simultaneously providing

the corporation with affective and affordable (or, often, free) marketing. Here, Duffy turns to sociologist Nikolas Rose to firmly denounce the internet's myth of democratic labour and leisure meritocracy. Locked in an endless spiral of economic capitalization of their own selves, these bloggers become their brand. For these women, aspiration comes in the form of a promise of exposure, as the platform of the internet is inherently rooted in its myth of discovery.

One of Duffy's most salient epigraphs precedes her sixth chapter, "The 'Instagram Filter': Dispelling the Myths of Entrepreneurial Glamour". Heather, a mommy blogger, calls blogging "the fastest hamster wheel possible. You don't ever get to get off of it." (Duffy 2017, 185). With Chapter 7 acting as her summation and concluding chapter, Chapter 6 is where Duffy's interviewees are the most revealing. It's where—as the chapter title's pun gestures towards—these social media producers remove the "filter" on their entrepreneurial aspirations. It is in this chapter where the interviewees shed light on the arduous, intensive, unglamorous work of building a Personal Brand, Inc., and where they cautiously critique the "Cult of Positivity" of "doing what you love." Heather, the mommy blogger quoted in the chapter's epigraph—once hailed by the *New York Times* as the "Queen of Mommy Bloggers"—is uncompromisingly honest about the unsustainability of the blogging profession (196), but she also admits to the privileges working from home provides for her (208). Additionally, despite running ragged on the hamster wheel, some bloggers share how they rarely publicly divulge whether or not they hire admin support. They explain that removing this filter could severely damage a hard-to-attained individualized brand. So, often, they continue to labour alone or keep their hired help secret.

By Chapter 6, the level of trust built between Duffy and her interviewees is notable. And it is, likely, Duffy's intention to end her book here—in a place of honest vulnerability. However, it is not just Duffy's interviewees who are trusting. She too, exposes a level of vulnerability in her epilogue that is rare in academic writing. Duffy's epilogue is undeniably the hardest-hit-

ting section for me—also an aspiring (white, cis, able-bodied) woman media studies academic. In the last few pages of her book, Duffy flips the aspirational veneer on herself: "I'm something of an aspirational laborer, too," she says. "After all, as a junior scholar, I am well-acquainted with the injunction to promote one's own work... I [soon] realized how similar the worlds of creative production and academic production really are—and thus how *aspirational* much of my *labour* was" (Duffy 2017, 230-231). Duffy's epilogue is profound: she, like many aspiring, women academics, feels compelled to dedicate a section of her book to laying bare the affective tensions of the academic labour of media studies—and I wonder, reading her epilogue, if my aspiring male academic colleagues would go out on such a limb. Let me be clear, in her epilogue, Duffy does not critique herself, nor her colleagues (of any gender). Rather, she acknowledges the structural tensions inherent in her own position, as an aspiring woman academic, whose privilege is notably distinct, yet mired in the affective lived realities of her interviewees.

Herein lies the methodological success of (*Not*) *Getting Paid*: Duffy is careful throughout her book to critique and situate her field of study and mirror it back to the industry that withstands it. Most notably, as media studies scholars interested in inequitable gender realities, by contradictory tensions fueled by the myths of digital democratization, and by the increasingly individualizing structures of creative labour, we can uphold Duffy's book as a methodological manual for how to do our critical work equitably and fairly. Duffy's ability to challenge the social-economic structures surrounding her interviewees, rather than the interviewees themselves, is particularly insightful for many of us who may struggle with the methodological query of how exactly to study media labour without replicating its systemic conditions of precarity. This is valuable and significant scholarship for any media studies labourer, at any level of their career aspirations.

### References

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