

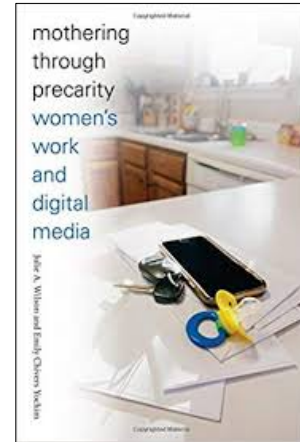
Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim, **Mothering Through Precarity: Women's Work and Digital Media**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, 232 pp., \$99.95 (hardcover), \$25.95 (paperback).

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Mothering Through Precarity explores the affective labor of mothering in a cultural context dominated by neoliberal precarity and the omniscience of digital media. A central premise of the book is the ways that the expectations of motherhood have swelled to absorb the increasing risks and obligations of neoliberal society, particularly through the affective work that is now inscribed in contemporary models of “good” mothering and often perpetuated by the structures and content of the digital “mamasphere.” In the words of the authors Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim: “In response to the generalized insecurities of advanced neoliberalism, mothers step up their affective labors, confronting the precarious status of the family with intensified and expanded practices of women’s work organized around privatizing happiness” (pp. 19–20).



While neoliberal individual responsibility has been addressed by many cultural studies’ scholars, *Mothering Through Precarity* rigorously documents this phenomenon in a way that centers the affective labors of motherhood and incorporates the important context of the digital mundane. The authors combine theories of affect and new media with an ethnography of 29 mothers living in the Rust Belt. These interviews, which are influenced by feminist audience studies’ methods, ultimately provide compelling testimonies that help ground the discussions of concepts such as affective infrastructures and the cruel optimism of maternal affect. This rich approach to the topic and subjects of inquiry makes this book valuable to feminist media and cultural studies’ scholars, motherhood studies, and those with an interest in the gendered aspects of new media and affect theory.

Mothering Through Precarity is structured around a series of contradictions upon which the discourse of maternal affective labor is formed. Chapter 1 historically contextualizes the role of mothering, before documenting the more recent influence of neoliberal family autonomy and the ethnopolitical government of mothers that has begun to dominate this gendered labor and situate it within a culture of high anxiety. The authors explain the ways that contemporary motherhood is expressed through the dual burdens of affective labor—which demands mothers’ moral responsibility for children and the nation, in addition to an increasing self-reflexivity of the role of mothering—and the negotiation of such discourses in the digital mundane.

Chapter 2 elaborates on the concept of “mamapreneurialism,” a term previously articulated by the authors in their excellent *Cultural Studies* article, “Mothering Through Precarity: Becoming Mamapreneurial” (Wilson & Yochim, 2015). Mamapreneurialism is fashioned as a response to the more trendy neologism, “mompreneurialism,” which is deployed as a postfeminist fantasy of “having it all” by combining domestic obligations with entrepreneurial creativity through the affordances of new media. In contrast,

mamapreneurialism is a sensibility directed toward increasing family appreciation and self-appreciation that is adopted by the resilient subject in her navigation of the increasingly impossible burdens placed upon motherhood in advanced neoliberalism. In this sense, mamapreneurialism sheds light on not only the economic activities but also the “banal decisions, activities, affects, and labors that constitute mothers’ everyday lives” (p. 67). Ultimately, the authors consider the ways that mamapreneurialism entraps mothers in a double bind of cruel optimism as work that at once offers resources and practical ways to survive in an age of precarity while simultaneously accelerating the exploitation and seeming potentialities of mamapreneurialism.

Chapter 3 explores the dual roles of the digital mamasphere—the unrelenting digital streams of “information, inspiration, and opportunity for mothers” (p. 16)—in both relieving and perpetuating the work of contemporary motherhood. The authors explore the role of the mamasphere in charging, communing, and coding/recoding affective labor, while also addressing the broader theoretical context of digital labor and Jodi Dean’s “communicative capitalism.”

Chapter 4 elaborates on the concept of “individualized solidarities” to express the privatization of motherhood in advanced neoliberalism that nevertheless inspires communities of mothers. This chapter explores the ways that such communities of mothers operate as “resiliency nets” that ultimately bind mothers more tightly to the “unworkable family scenes and tethered to the horizons of neoliberal precarity” (p. 140). The role of digital networks in facilitating such communities is demonstrated through the popular website *Momastery* by blogger Glennon Doyle, in addition to Yochim’s participation in a local *Mothers of Preschoolers* community group. The book concludes with an account of the ways that motherhood continues to be deeply guided by affective infrastructures, particularly in an age of neoliberal precarity, and draws on Sara Ahmed’s concept of affective aliens as an ending provocation about how we might reimagine the possibilities and potentialities of the labor of mothering.

It is Wilson and Yochim’s focus on the mundane and affective experiences of mothering and the particular impact of digital culture that situates this text as an updated and novel study of similar monographs that have documented the increasingly unrelenting demands of motherhood generated in advanced neoliberalism, including Sharon Hays’s (1996) *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels’ (2004) *The Mommy Myth*, as well as Arlie Hochschild’s work on emotional labor. Additionally, this study offers valuable insights on the ways that digital culture and motherhood contribute to the tradition of turning to the mundane as a site of politics and identity making in feminist cultural studies.

Some of the terrain this book covers on the gendered and mundane aspects of digital culture—such as the extent to which corporations extract and exploit the free digital labor of participants, the ambivalence of negotiating the digital mundane, the interfacing of the individual and the collective/community, and the political potentialities that are threaded throughout digital media but so rarely realized—are not original insights, but are meticulously documented by foregrounding the maternal experience in a way that sheds important light on the lucrative, gendered, and understudied space of the mamasphere. The description of the digital mundane as “seamlessly woven into the fabric of family and women’s work” (p. 16) is elegantly discussed in the introduction, although at times the book’s argument

about the mundane omniscience of digital media is diluted through competing attention to ethnographic observations about motherhood and the detailed discussions of affect theory. This is perhaps an inevitable outcome of the richness of theoretical traditions that this book draws from and contributes to.

Additionally, while the authors readily acknowledge the homogeneous normative and middle-class skew of their respondents, the discussions in this book may have benefited from greater interrogation of the gendering of motherhood, the nuclear family, and the mamasphere. The discussions of affective labor would benefit from some consideration of the gendered traditionalism that appears in many ways to be reignited by advanced neoliberalism and the mamasphere, particularly as the authors begin to reimagine the potentialities of motherhood and happiness, parenting, and the nuclear family unit.

Ultimately, *Mothering Through Precarity* offers an in-depth account of a landscape in which the myths of neoliberalism have been decisively shattered, but are nevertheless perpetuated through the affective infrastructures and quotidian routines of motherhood. The authors' attention to the details of the lives of the mothers interviewed brings to life the digital mundane and its enfolding in everyday maternal routines. This study serves as an original and important scholarly contribution on gendered digital culture and the growing mamasphere. Moreover, contained within this case study is a broader commentary about the multiple contradictions and cruel optimism that spur neoliberalism, and the ways in which the digital mundane is increasingly complicit in such work.

References

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