

Of Woman Born to Mommy Blogged: The Journey from the Personal as Political to the Personal as Commodity

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“Mommy blogging is a radical act!” proclaimed Alice Bradley, a well-known and prolific blogger, at the 2005 BlogHer Conference. Her assertion reframed and elevated the genre of online writing that deals with mothering, colloquially referred to as “mommy blogs.” Blogging motherhood may feel radical because it allows for an up-to-the-minute, authentic, and less isolated take on motherhood, one that veers from the highly edited and airbrushed version found in other media, such as magazines or television. Bradley articulates the difference here:

We readers and authors of parenting blogs are looking for a representation of authentic experience that we’re not getting elsewhere. We sure as hell aren’t getting it from the parenting magazines . . . [A] parenting magazine will never help you feel less alone, less stupid, less ridiculous. This is the service I think parenting blogs provide—we share our lopsided, slightly hysterical, often exaggerated but more or less authentic experiences. If one blogger writes about, say, her bad behavior at the doctor’s office, then maybe at some point, some freaked-out new mother is going to read that and feel a little better—less stupid, less ridiculous—about her own breakdown at the pediatrician’s. (quoted in Camahort 2006)

As Bradley suggests, the “service” of the blogs is to present an “authentic” version of motherhood that deviates from the older accounts found in broadcast media (such as parenting magazines), wherein mothering is made out to be both instinctual and fulfilling. The blogs provide a space for women, mothers, and caregivers—no matter how “freaked out” or “hysterical”—to provide and receive emotional validation. Bradley’s use

of the terms “authentic experience” and “radical” nods to the second wave feminist tradition of consciousness raising but, as I detail in this paper, falls short of it. As Catherine Rottenberg notes, when 1970s feminists discussed personal experiences it was always “accompanied by some form of critique of male domination and/or structural discrimination” (2013, 14). We find no similar pattern within the mommy blog genre despite their rhetoric that digital media radically reframes their experiences as mothers. For Bradley and other bloggers in this genre, to “feel less stupid” or “less alone” is the goal; they rarely connect their feelings or experiences to gendered structures of power. For all the bandwidth given to the personal, little attention is given to the political.

This article investigates the claim that blogging “authentic experience” is a political act. Mining personal experience was the first step in transforming society for second wave feminists. Today, when personal experience meets up with digital technology, it is mined instead for two intertwined forms of value production: emotional and economic. Emotional value comes from the “crowdsourcing” of validation, as Bradley’s quote makes plain. Economic value comes from the way online platforms turn such digital expressions of care into content, which the proprietors of social media platforms leverage for profits via data accumulation, advertising, and website traffic. Today, authentic experience has been absorbed into our modern-day digital mode of production. Experience becomes a commodity produced endlessly, in this case, by mothers.

To map the shift from the personal-for-politics to the personal-for-production, I compare personal writings on motherhood from two sources separated by approximately forty years: Adrienne Rich’s 1976 book *Of Woman Born* (reprinted in 1986) and selections from mommy blogs, which explore all aspects of motherhood and have a global readership in the millions. Despite being separated generationally from Rich, mommy bloggers discuss their experiences in startlingly similar terms. The blogs are a rich and vast archive of experiences of motherhood, yet the feminist project of situating women’s experiences within a larger social context as a way to effect change, as so adroitly done by Rich, has disappeared. The intimate experiences of contemporary motherhood become a commodity through two interrelated structures: the architecture of social media platforms, which garner value from the free labor of users, and the cultural diffusion of “narratives of resilience,” which refer to public articulations of personal triumph over societal obstacles (James 2015). I argue that

mommy blogs reveal a simultaneous commodification and depoliticization of motherhood, where value is generated by mothers but absorbed by media platforms. Returning to Rich and the feminism of the 1970s provides a method to connect personal experience to our contemporary political landscape and to, ultimately, imagine a different world.

Method

My argument comes from a narrative and content analysis based on forty-seven blogs that I followed from April 2010 to November 2013. The dynamism of the Internet in general, and mommy blogs in particular, make the genre difficult to measure. My method is less an attempt to define or document the entire genre and more a way to think through how this online niche works, both at the interpretive level and through a consideration of the labor (in the Marxist sense) blogging requires and the value it produces.

A mommy blogger, as defined by Scarborough market research firm, is any woman with “at least one child in their household [who has] read or contributed to a blog in the past 30 days” (2012). Using this definition, 14 percent of all American mothers participate in blogs somehow, and 3.9 million North American mothers self-identify as bloggers. From my sample, and according to the Scarborough definition, these figures seem low; I often read comments from women who claimed to not have children or from women whose children were now adults. The broadness of Scarborough’s definition, however, highlights how passive activities such as reading blogs contribute to the overall market activity. While there remain important differences between one who sets up a blog, administers it, writes posts, and comments on posts, anyone who taps into the network generates something of value. Reading a blog produces at minimum a page view, and if the reader shares a post or “likes” it, she creates value for the blogger, who can, depending on the total number of page views, pull in more or less paid advertisers. The reader generates data and leaves a trace of where she was previously and where she goes next. Advertisers, of course, are interested in all potential moves readers make—especially if they have more income than average or control household spending, as mothers typically do (Crittenden 2010).

I found that blogs in this genre discuss the work of motherhood in

stark, provocative, and “authentic” terms. Through humor or memoir, mothers write about the struggles they face caring for children, negotiating careers, dealing with partners, and coping with the ways maternity has altered their everyday lives. While the work of motherhood is often couched in ambivalence, writers within this genre clearly present blogging as a labor of love, claiming it provides them emotional support and increases their self-esteem. Heather Armstrong, creator of the popular blog *dooce*, even credits blogging with “saving [her] life” (2013). This communicative choice builds a loyal readership and makes the genre unique. Like the act of self-disclosure in consciousness-raising groups decades earlier, mommy blogs en masse reframe the daily experiences of millions of women. Academics and activists hold out hope that this collective sharing will reveal systemic patterns of inequality and spark social movements, much like the feminism that came out of the second wave (Lopez 2009). In what follows, I suggest why such hopes may be misguided.

To situate my argument, I sketch out the feminist practice of consciousness raising (CR) that was the backdrop to Rich’s book *Of Woman Born*. I am using Rich’s text because, unlike many of the other seminal 1970s feminist texts, it deals exclusively with motherhood. I then explain that while blogged discussions of motherhood are eerily similar to Rich’s depictions, the corresponding political-economic context for contemporary mothers has changed dramatically. The challenges of motherhood are overwhelmingly couched as personal problems that can be overcome by readjusting one’s mind rather than, as the feminists of the 1970s asserted, by readjusting society. Comparing Rich to mommy bloggers, we see that little has changed regarding care work. We also find the feminist project of imagining a better world has withered. While personal experience was a route to political change (even if only imagined) in the 1970s, today it is increasingly utilized for the production of both psychological and economic value.

Consciousness Raising in the 1970s

Feminists in the 1970s rallied behind the phrase “the personal is political” to expose the intimate nature of systemic gender inequalities. More than a slogan, the “magical phrase” was also a method. As Victoria Hesford notes, “For black and Chicana feminists, as for white feminists in women’s liberation, personal experience was the beginning point for their critical

resistance to masculinist ideologies” (2013, 119). Unsurprisingly, “personal” experience tended to reflect white, middle-class, and heterosexual norms. Carolyn Dever writes that CR groups “acted against but also presumed normative codes of identity . . . [W]omen were always already married, middle-class, and restless” (2003, 32). “The personal,” writes Hesford was a “scene of intense disidentification with women’s liberation by many black women and women of color during the early years of the second-wave movement” (2013, 126). Despite this imbalance of power, or even because of it, politicizing personal experience remained a useful method to destabilize gender norms and racial privilege and to articulate social hierarchies within civil rights and new left movements. For black feminists, CR “began the process of linking the symptoms of racism and sexism to systems and institutions” (Springer 2005, 121). Personal experience was seen as the route to understanding oppression, even within feminism, and building a new world with gender, racial, and economic justice at its core.

Moving from the personal to the political was done through CR. Through sharing personal stories, women found commonalities and connected their experiences to systems of oppression. Carol Hanisch’s seminal 1969 essay “The Personal Is Political” describes how consciousness raising differs from therapy: “These . . . sessions are a form of political action. . . . One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.” Through CR work, Hanisch argues, “we came early to the conclusion that all alternatives are bad under present conditions,” wherein “present conditions” meant capitalist patriarchy (1969). One of the main goals of second wave feminism was to democratize analytic skills so that all women could build a political movement from the bottom up, or from the inside—their psyche—out. CR was thus considered a “radical weapon” to combat the more affective forms of male domination (Sarachild 1978, 144).

By connecting women’s personal struggles to larger social forces, feminists in the 1970s engaged in a political project that aimed to restructure “present conditions,” often beginning with intimate, sexual relationships. Feminists believed CR held great potential for them, as can be gleaned from their political goals: they wanted nothing less than “total change promised in revolution” (Dever 2003, 39). As Johanna Brenner points out, second wave feminists wanted to change women’s material conditions

by redistributing wealth through guaranteed income, paid maternity leave, and socialized care (2014).

In many regards, the work of these feminists has paid off. Jumping ahead four decades, the daughters of the second wave have had doors opened in education and the workforce, and increased personal freedoms. Despite such changes, motherhood remains a second-class status for even the most privileged of women, and the wage gap for mothers, especially for women of color, is dramatically wider than the average of seventy-eight cents to the dollar. For all the work and victories of the second wave “policy issues related to child care, familial leave, and maternal and children’s health remain unresolved” (Pitts-Taylor and Schaffer 2009, 9). Women’s progress, therefore, has been predicated on them acting like men. While, in general women have made some progress towards greater equity, the state of motherhood remains stuck in the 1970s.

Neoliberal Narratives of Resilience

Since the 1970s, economic changes and corresponding shifts in ideology have eviscerated the working and middle classes and weakened unions and labor interests, all while women have entered the paid workforce in record numbers. Along with an economic assault on wages and social welfare programs, the Reagan years ushered in narratives of self-reliance, thinly veiling a racist misogyny in which women, poor people, and people of color were blamed for their structural disadvantages. Taken together, this economic restructuring and ideological shift rightward are referred to as “neoliberalism,” or the philosophy that “everything can and should work like a deregulated market” (James 2015, 26).

Such a historical trajectory explains our contemporary moment, wherein the social position of women is trivialized into personal, microlevel struggles. Rottenberg articulates the neoliberal framework as one that is “distinctly aware of current inequalities” but “disavows . . . the forces producing this inequality” (2013, 2–3). As an example of this logic, books like *Lean In* (2013), written by Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg, co-opt feminist language and CR strategies but completely strip away critiques of structural inequalities. *Lean In* exemplifies neoliberal feminism by placing the burden of discrimination on individuals. In this feminism, inequalities will disappear when, to quote Sandberg, women “stop being afraid” of success and delegate their caretaking to others. There are “lean in circles”

where small groups of women get together to overcome psychological insecurities that interfere with their careers (see “Lean In Circles” 2014). This diluted form of CR focuses exclusively on the internal, psychological realm among relatively privileged women. The underlying message is that to lean in to their careers, women must lean out of motherhood.

The co-opting of feminist language and the quasi self-exploration espoused by neoliberal feminism has become a highly commodifiable product in today’s digital economy. Through digital technologies, women’s intimate, personal narratives have exploded into our cultural register. Paul De Laat finds that participation in memoir blogging communities is predicated on divulging intimate details (2008). This divulging folds into “resilience” narratives, which Robin James defines as performances that showcase “the ability to recover from disaster” (2015, 78). James argues that femininity itself is rescripted through the neoliberal narrative of resilience: “femininity is performed first as damage, second as resilience” (82). Through moxie, grit, or other forms of positive psychology, women publically overcome the damages—economic, bodily, psychic—imposed by patriarchy. The danger of resilience narratives is that they treat patriarchy “as problems for women to solve individually” (83). And mothers, with their economic and social structural disadvantages, have much to overcome.

Resilience narratives reverberate throughout the mommy blog genre and, in the process, depoliticize structural inequalities, even as they produce “likes” and “shares” and drive website traffic. On social media especially, showcasing resilience generates economic value via an “endless collapse of the political into the personal” (Stoeffel 2014). The more we circulate bits of ourselves and recite the damages we’ve overcome (body image, discrimination, divorce), the more friends and followers we gain and the more social media platforms increase in net worth. As mothering remains socially unsupported and economically devalued, participation in Internet communities provides a space for women to regain value. Mothers’ attention online is especially valued: Petronzio reports that “the average person’s marketing data is worth 10 cents; a pregnant woman’s data skyrockets to \$1.50” (2014). Mommy blogs do not represent a sudden increase in maternal consciousness. Instead, relief from the devalued work of motherhood can be found online. The architecture of the web has evolved to extract value out of such gendered alienation.

Architecture of the Web: Capitalizing on Networks of Care

The massive production of narratives of resilience and the networks of care they create occur through what Tiziana Terranova terms free labor, which include “forms of labour we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, real-life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters” (2004, 79). Blogging in any form or genre, for pleasure or as a hobby, exemplifies free labor. Women produce websites devoted to their experiences as mothers, farmers, and homeschoolers *ad infinitum*, and they do so for free, for the pleasure of production, for emotional relief, or for the social connections that result. Catherine Connors, the blogger of *Her Bad Mother*, notes the connection between free labor and pleasure, arguing that mothers “resist having their blogs become workmanlike; once one stops enjoying the writing and involvement in the community, there is little incentive to continue” (2009, 96). The value of free digital labor has both easy measures (page views, links, and clicks) and not-so-easy measures (fantasies of launching the next big website; gaining Internet fame, followers, and fortune; and blogging oneself out of an unfulfilling, inflexible career).

Connors exemplifies just how profitable this genre is. She became so successful from her personal blogging that she was hired as an editor at *Babble*, a website devoted to publishing parenting content. Shortly after she began working there, Disney bought *Babble*. Connors explains the buyout by suggesting that stories are central to the human experience and by asserting that Disney is, at heart, a storytelling company. She fails to acknowledge that Disney stories have been roundly critiqued for their heterosexist, racist, ableist, and classist plots and characters, an omission no one with her academic (a PhD in philosophy) and feminist credentials could innocently make. In fact, she framed Disney’s move as “radical,” writing:

And now Disney—who, as you may have heard, has acquired Babble—is doing something that I think is really kind of awesomely radical: they’re embracing Babble, and Babble’s culture of parent-facing storytelling. (Connors 2011)

A less rosy reading would conclude, in contrast, that the “parent-facing storytelling” that Disney is “embracing” is another instance of capital accumulation from the capture of free labor. By buying a high-traffic node in the online parenting space, Disney captured a digital factory, where

the “engine” runs on labor of the “tellers of . . . stories.” With this acquisition, Disney can now “expand” their “storytelling universe” (Connors 2011). This is the model of digital capitalism, where online participation is “milked” for value extraction by the producers of media platforms (Scholz 2014). Women, especially, play a central role in generating value online as their images drive traffic to websites (Losse 2014).

Connors repeats the idea that blogging motherhood is “awesomely radical,” but here “radical” refers to the opportunity for mothers to capitalize on their experiences instead of politicize them. The fantasy percolating throughout the blogs, and encouraged by Disney’s investment in storytellers, is that the experience of motherhood can become an entrepreneurial activity online, even if the value sought by the mother-blogger is emotional.

The radicalness of exposing the intimacies of motherhood, as Rich and 1970s feminists did, however, is stripped of its political force in a neoliberal milieu because there is no separate, private, nonmarket sphere—all intimate, inner experiences enter the market via digital platforms. The narrative media today demand nothing less from those who wish to participate. Any experience, especially one that performs resilience, garners attention online. Mommy bloggers may indeed strike us as radical, but more because they expose a subject who has no separate sphere, as her 1970s counterpart did, to both imagine and build a political movement. By blogging motherhood, our most revered and private institution, mothers appear to be “casting every human endeavor and activity in entrepreneurial terms” (Rottenberg 2013, 4).

Returning to Rich

In an effort to resurrect the 1970s feminist imagination of a better world, I turn now to Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* to locate the similarities between motherhood as written in the 1970s and today. Rich’s book remains a paradigmatic example of how the personal is political. Explaining her choice to include her experiences as a mother, she writes, “Only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours” (Rich [1976] 1986, 16). By noting the ways class and race shaped her experiences, Rich highlights the importance of personal stories in mapping the trajectory of patriarchy. Illustrating the structural analysis

accompanying second wave feminist thought, Rich describes the two different registers of motherhood, one “superimposed on the other,” that she aims to reconcile: “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (13).

For Rich, connecting these registers of the personal and the institutional is challenging because of the intimate work of maternity. She writes: “I could not begin to think of writing a book on motherhood until I began to feel strong enough and unambivalent enough in my love for my children” (15). Reflecting on her diaries, Rich realizes, “for centuries no one talked of these feelings” surrounding the ambivalence of mothering (25). In fact, bloggers often claim that writing about motherhood is radical because, historically, so little has been published from the mother’s perspective. Laura Apfel writes in 2014 in *TIME*, “The idea that motherhood is a topic worthy of serious reflection is in its infancy”.

That Rich could not think of writing about motherhood until she worked through her ambivalence is striking in today’s context as bloggers leave no feeling unexplored. The blog posts that “go viral” (with a webpage being sent from one to many to many more, like a virus) are often those that push against cultural ideals of the “good” mother. Rich deliberated over using her personal stories but shared them in hopes of contributing to the feminist project of making a world that is “truly ours” (16). In contrast, mothers today enthusiastically blog their daily thoughts, live-tweet their labor, and photograph their pregnancies from beginning to end without explicitly conveying feminist motivations or politics.

Guilt

Rich begins her project of politicizing her personal experiences by ruminating on her childhood, noting that, while young, she “was only acting the part of the feminine creature” ([1976] 1986, 25). After becoming pregnant Rich felt, for once, “in sync” with the feminine gender script: “As soon as I was visibly and clearly pregnant, I felt, for the first time in my adolescent and adult life, not guilty. *This is what women have always done*” (26, italics in the original). Rich connects the “not guilty” feeling to broader narratives that situate motherhood as an eternal truth, as the work “women have always done.” Motherhood brought with it a temporary

gender passing, as well as the realization that the patriarchal institution of motherhood “allowed [her] only certain views and expectations,” which ultimately alienated her from her creative and intellectual life (39). While pregnancy brought a brief reprieve from feeling guilty for not adhering to gendered expectations, this break also brought with it a denial of “every active, powerful aspect” of herself (39).

Rich finds that the gendered alienation she experiences comes from maternity being a pivotal point of social control. She explains:

My individual, seemingly private pains as a mother, the individual seemingly private pains of the mothers around me and before me, whatever our class or color, the regulation of women’s reproductive power by men in every totalitarian system and every socialist revolution, the legal and technical control by men of contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics, gynecology, and extrauterine reproductive experiments—all are essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers. (34)

Only by diving into her “private pains” can Rich access the “fundamental” element of patriarchy and the untold history of motherhood in Western cultures; in the personal she finds the political. The only way, for Rich, to overcome such “pains” is through complete revolution.

Echoing Rich’s aforementioned feeling that motherhood brings with it an unexpected reprieve from guilt, Rebecca Woolf, the creator of the popular blog *Girl’s Gone Child*, also writes about her newfound experience of nonguilt as it corresponds with motherhood:

Archer’s birth was the first time I let myself be happy. Truly, honestly, without guilt happy. And even though, in the first few years after his birth, I suffered and struggled and spent many a night, day, week crying over a new and confusing life, I was free. (2010)

Woolf brushes under the rug the years she suffered “over a new and confusing” life and focuses on a freedom she finds in motherhood. Here we see the resilience narrative at work: Woolf overcame a vaguely defined “suffering and struggling” and found happiness. Woolf does not connect “crying” about how “confusing” life can be to larger social forces. Confusion about motherhood is a commonly expressed feeling online because, in large part, most women today have been “raised with an easy belief in their own capacities” and are “shocked to find that as soon as they [give] birth, a bar-

rage of social, economic, and institutional structures position them into a second-class unpaid status” (Pitts-Taylor and Schaffer 2009, 11). When mothers seek solace online, as Woolf did, the alienation imposed by maternity transforms into a form of value. In Woolf’s case it paid off: her large online following translated into her personal economic success.

Loss of Self, Then and Now

Rich’s frustration with motherhood’s demand of the denial of “every powerful aspect” is mirrored in the words of blogger Kim Foster. In the beginning weeks of summer vacation, Foster has a difficult time adjusting to her children being home as they interfere with her writing: “I’m in the bedroom, the dark bedroom, writing this, because I haven’t written anything of real merit in days, and that makes me crazy, makes me feel like I’m separating from myself” (2013). She describes a brief moment alone with her computer, in which she reconnects:

I’ve been alone for 15 minutes, laying on cool sheets, it’s dark, nothing but computer light on my face, and it’s good, it’s really good, I feel myself fill up a bit as I type, like helium being blown into my balloon. Then Edie, sweet Edie, rolls into the cave and aims her little face at me and tells me she’s sorry—she knows I was upset, needed my space. And I smile because I love that, love that she gives a damn . . . Her pull is the kind that aligns planets, pulls galaxies together. (2013)

Foster articulates an unspoken demand of motherhood: that mothers forgo their pursuits—“I haven’t written anything of real merit in days”—to satisfy their children’s needs. She does not directly speak to the institutional constraints of motherhood but finds that returning to writing allows her to “fill up.” In the passage, Foster writes of the loss of self brought on by motherhood and then shows how she overcomes this damage: a brief respite with her computer. The computer, the blog, and the connection with her audience are her routes to overcoming the structural isolation imposed by motherhood.

Rich, too, wrote on the challenges of writing and mothering coterminously. She describes her inner thoughts while caring for her son:

I would feel his wants at such a moment as fraudulent, as an attempt moreover to defraud me of living even for fifteen minutes as myself. My anger would rise; I would feel the futility of any attempt to salvage myself, and also the inequality between us: my needs always balanced against those of a child, and always losing. I could love so much better, I told myself, after even a quarter hour of selfishness, of peace, of detachment from my children. A few minutes! ([1976] 1986, 23)

Like the contemporary mothers online, Rich describes the “inequality” between mother and child in a context where the mother is the primary caregiver, isolated in a home. In the two passages from Rich and Foster, separated by decades, both writers struggle with the unique “pull” between mother and child. Rich, however, goes on to point out that the “circle, this magnetic field” between mother and child “was not a natural phenomena” but brought about through the naturalization of mothers as primary caregivers (43). Rich writes in hopes of reimagining the socially imposed relationship between mother and child, whereas bloggers often take it for granted.

Relief from the Political

Often, the mommy blog genre actively moves away from politicizing the “magnetic field” between mother and child. The following excerpt from the blog *Mom-101* by Liz Gumbinner exemplifies the genre’s tendency to disconnect the personal from the political. Gumbinner writes, “There are just some things you accept that you give up experiencing when you’re a working mom . . . Mostly I’ve learned to do without; what choice do I have? Still, some of them hurt a little more than others” (2010). Gumbinner conveys frustration that work interferes with her mothering, yet she does not pursue political interpretations because she has “learned to do without; what choice do[es she] have?”

In the comments section readers empathically nod their heads, sharing their own stories. Gumbinner replies to the comments because, like CR sessions, mommy blogs skew toward openness and support. The following exchange between a reader, Marinka, and Gumbinner showcases such support and a defraying of politics. Marinka responds to Gumbinner’s above post with the following:

I'm going to break rank and tell you, because my kids are older and I am very wise, that you can't succumb to mommy guilt. Because it's, what's the word? Bullshit. Sexist bullshit. How many hours has their father spent fretting about not being able to accompany his daughters to the pediatrician? I'm guessing the number is a fraction of yours, and I'd also bet that he loves them just as much. If I told you that your place is with them . . . when they get a shot, the internet would rise against me and I'd be Gloria Steinemed off the URL. And yet . . . I'm sorry that you're feeling bad about it, truly. I know it's not easy. (2010)

Marinka points out a structural difference between the labor of mothers and fathers, ending with the reassurance that she “knows it isn't easy.” Gumbinner responds in a way that keeps it supportive, laughing off the political: “Marinka, I love you and your tough love. I don't know if it's sexist or if it's just some biological maternal need to protect and comfort. Probably both. But I suppose it's more fun to blame the patriarchy.”

The above exchange highlights how, instead of encouraging political interpretations, these blogs more often provide “relief from the political” (Berlant 2008, 10). They are spaces of intimacy, and while feminism is welcome to a degree, “the texts of women's culture never pass beyond a certain point: the signs always say ‘Go home’” (205). “Going home” refers to detaching the personal from the political and leaving the heterofamily structure unchallenged. The blogs transform women's experience into networks of emotional support, not grounds for political action.

Returning to the 1970s

Motherhood is a crucial fault line of inequality, and the 1970s feminist method of connecting the personal to the political remains a useful tactic to counter apolitical narratives of motherhood. As I have shown here, the expectations of motherhood have changed little since Rich's era, yet the narratives around them have changed dramatically. As neoliberal policies degrade social and economic supports for care work, women and mothers increasingly pick up the slack. This gendered response is often turned into a personal obstacle and, when performed on social media platforms, becomes a way to recuperate value. Contemporary feminists must not only politicize the narratives of resilience but also connect them to the media on which they occur.

Interestingly, in the digital sphere, there has been a recuperation of the

Wages for Housework campaign (in which women demanded compensation for their reproductive labor, an effort led by Italian feminists in the 1970s) in a “Wages for Facebook” (WFF) movement (2014). The parallel between maternal labor and digital labor is evident: both are done freely, for the pleasure of connection, and massive value is culled from both. However, caring for children is never-ending work and remains radically different from participating in social media. Although difficult, we can walk away from Facebook. Despite this difference, WFF showcases the logic of digital economies where economic value is culled from the freely given labor found in today’s digital sociality.

There is a storyline on the blogs that pushes beyond the neoliberal narrative of resilience. In Rich we find the kernel of this politics: she suggests that maternity be brought into politics and that feminists “come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny” ([1976] 1986, 40). Maternity remains a stumbling block for women’s equality, and the politics of it have gained little traction since the 1970s. Motherhood, by virtue of its embodied connection to another being, provides a salient critique to the narratives of the resilient individual. Rich describes the embodied pleasures of maternity:

The baby belongs there, curled, suspended asleep between her mother’s breasts, as she belonged curled in the womb. The young mother . . . speaks of . . . the pure pleasure of having this new creature, immaculate, perfect. And I walk away from her drenched with memory, with envy . . . I envy the sexuality of having an infant of two weeks curled against one’s breast. (33)

Rich suggests that women’s reproductive capacity offers a unique, if undertheorized, source of power. Because the daily labor of caring for children falls squarely on women, Rich argues, the embodied pleasures of maternity get distorted. Rich presciently wrote, “If motherhood and sexuality were not wedged resolutely apart by male culture, if we could choose both the forms of our sexuality and the terms of our motherhood or nonmotherhood freely, women might achieve genuine sexual autonomy” (84).

Muffled throughout the blogs is a similar feeling that maternity brings an experience outside of the dominant narrative of (hetero)femininity and sexuality. For some bloggers, the experience of maternity has nothing to do with damage or lost autonomy. For example, Andie Fox, the feminist blogger of *blue milk*, describes a new experience of pleasure accompanying

maternity, writing that her “body awed [her] in new ways,” which she attributes to our “narrow idea, culturally, of what sex is” (2013). The digital presence of mothers online makes the embodied pleasures of motherhood hypervisible, challenging the idea that motherhood is something to overcome. Blog posts, like Fox’s, that describe or display such experiences of “awe” provide a counter narrative to resilience.

The neoliberal logic of resilience sanitizes motherhood of its embodied pleasures. Putting the “pure pleasure” of a baby “curled against one’s breast” front and center provides a useful fault line within neoliberal ideologies for feminists to exploit. Amplifying the pleasures of social connection, whether with baby or blog, challenges, however covertly, neoliberal logic and asks us to imagine, as Rich did in 1976, what it would take for women to “achieve genuine sexual autonomy” (184). Or, put another way, by going with the grain of neoliberal logic, feminists could ask what happens when the political, such as a lack of paid maternity leave, gets in the way of the personal, the “pure pleasure” of maternity?

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