

Blogging Like A Mother

Taking up ideas from Karen and Andy's previous posts, I want to think through some of my work on the mommy blog genre within these discussions. This genre offers some unique, concrete points and counter points to considerations of digital and [free labor](#).

On a draft of my dissertation, my advisor left the somewhat cryptic comment: "capital always keeps mothers close." This struck me as counterintuitive to the feminist scholarship that tracks how resolutely mothers (and women) are kept out of capital. It's a depressing tome of scholarship—from Crittenden's "[mommy tax](#)" to Orloff's "[Farewell to Maternalism](#)," and recently Kendzior's piece on mothers being "[Out of Options](#)." Things do not look good, economically, for mothers. It's not just mothers who suffer: [Berlant](#) argues that after decades of neoliberal restructuring "the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace" (2011). Motherhood, as one infrastructure of reproduction, has been disproportionately abandoned by capital restructuring.

Yet, in the world of digital media, "capital," which term includes for the sake of this entry at least digital technology industries and all the advertising and data mining money that follows, cozies up to (some) mothers. Mothers, like the rest of us, continue to offer up our time, attention, and data to social media companies with full knowledge that our participation lines the pockets of a select few. Digital technologies have evolved to extract value from almost anyone, at almost any time, and across lifetimes; the possibilities appear to be endless.

While a few elite mommy bloggers prosper from their labor, [dooce.com](#) as the paradigmatic example, it's safe to say, those who participate in this genre understand it's unlikely they'll be the next dooce or that they will be significantly remunerated. (A certain fantasy surrounds mommy blogging as a vocation but that is another post.) Mommy bloggers, in particular, claim that intimacy and connection are the reward for their digital labor. As they tell it, online communities offer a powerful salve for contemporary motherhood and if it means selling out (offering up content) to Zuckerberg from time to time, so be it.

Perhaps the unequal resources and rewards of digital labor would not be so worrisome if contemporary motherhood were not such an economic minefield. The contradictions mothers face is perfectly captured in the [Lean In](#) corporate feminism that essentially, through self-help and positive psychology rhetoric, places the burden on individual women to overcome structural inequalities. bell hooks thoroughly deconstructs the racist and imperialist implications in the *Lean In* logic [here](#). [Kate Losse](#) critiques *Lean In* along similar lines but also keys into its beef with in-the-flesh maternity. [She writes](#):

The fact that *Lean In* is really waging a battle for work and against unmonetized life is the reason pregnancy, or the state of reproducing life, looms as the corporate Battle of Normandy in *Lean In*. Pregnancy, by virtue of the body's physical focus on human reproduction, is humanity's last, biological stand against the corporate demand for workers' continuous labor. ("Feminisms Tipping Point: Who Wins from Leaning In?" Losse, 3/26/11)

By contrast, in the mommy blog world pregnancy, maternity, and motherhood are put to work: mommy bloggers circulate the pregnant/maternal body, often challenging unrealistic [beauty](#) standards in the process (and, as [Karen pointed out](#), sometimes not). Online, “reproducing life” is not lost to “corporate use” at all ([ibid](#)).

As the space and time available for mothering IRL diminish due to institutional discriminations and neoliberal economic policies (such as paltry maternity leaves, stagnate wages, rising housing costs *ad infinitum*) the mommy blogs provide spaces to be, and imagine being, ‘just a mom.’ Social media corporations are eager to tap into the circulation of motherhood because, as one example, on Facebook “women’s images drive the site itself, where the most popular content has always been intimate, personal photographs of women” ([Losse](#)). The gap between lived motherhood and digital motherhood generates never-ending content and hope for never-ending profit.

The MB genre, then, runs counter to the digital spaces that siphon “presence” as [Andy describes](#). While of course wanting clicks and hits, these blogs resist, at least rhetorically, such economies of presence. Kathleen Stone, the creator of the successful blog [Postpartum Progress](#), explains the difference between presence and attention. Economies of presence, for example, do the following:

Websites create contests like these for one reason: to drive traffic. They tell you that you're up for some award, and that the way to win is to send everyone you know to *their site* — not yours — to vote for you. What's more, they want you to send people to *their site* to vote EVERY DAY. Not just once, but over and over and over.

She, however, wants to stay in the realm of attention:

What good does it do for me to drive friends and family and people I hardly know up the wall so that some other website can get a lot of traffic?

I just want to talk to **you**, the person reading this right now. I like **you** and want to know **you** and am so glad **you** are here. That's what matters to me.

-(["On Blogging, Popularity Contests & Why I QUIT!"](#) May 26, 2011. www.postpartumprogress.com)

Women’s online attention and digital labor is such a hot commodity that Brian Goldberg is trying to capture as much of it as possible with a slightly modified Bleacher Report model. He plans nothing short of reaching “[tens of millions of people](#)” which he plans to do by producing content “with an eye towards every single American.” To this end, he will “sign ‘tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of checks each month to young, female writers” (“From Mars” [Lizzie Widdicombe](#), September 23, 2013).

The critique and [mockery](#) of hustle come out of his using ‘quality content’ a straw man when he really wants millions of clicks and hits. Even the hustle headquarters, a townhouse Williamsburg decorated in “mid-century modern décor,” attempts to create some imagined laboratory of intimate, feminine writing (a room of one’s own? A college dorm? I’m at a loss...[here](#) is the image).

The MB scene stands in sharp relief to this hustle/BR/presence model. I see the success of the mommy blog niche as partly due to their channeling of, what Berlant terms, “de-dramatized” scenes of domesticity—these blogs slow down daily life and condense motherhood into [peaceful](#), humorous, or beautiful meals, rooms, and [atmospheres](#). The digital labor behind these blogs produce a frame, an acknowledgement, or a break from the reality of being “[Maxed Out](#)” ([Alcorn](#)) and the continued “attrition of a fantasy” of “the good life” (Berlant).

There is a palpable hope that mommy blogs provide a way to see how our digital labor could produce “different forms of subjectivity and different models of what an economy of social cooperation could be like” ([Terranova](#)). I’m not sure. It remains to be seen if digital labor can create something we need beyond “[hyperemployment](#)” and/or exploitation. We are up against platforms hyper-invested by capital that, by design, aim to drown out slower, more present attention.