



Quelling Anxiety as Intimate Work: Maternal Responsibility to Alleviate Bad Feelings Emerging from Precarity

AMANDA WATSON

Simon Fraser University, Canada

ABSTRACT *This article brings feminist literature on anxiety and wellness to bear on the responsibilities of mothers as they are represented in a series of popular editorial publications. It seeks to deepen the interdisciplinary dialogue between these theories of affect and theories of care work by examining how popular representations of maternal responsibility reflect a contemporary “affect of motherhood” and indicate specifically that mothers might be “coming undone” under the weight of a shared, political anxiety that they are encouraged to feel individually. It is argued that the newly complex and competing labours of mothers, and mothers’ complicity in and resistance to these labours, can only be understood in the context of public anxiety. It asks what is at stake for the most disenfranchised women when it comes to recognizing and resisting today’s intensified forms of maternal responsibility.*

KEYWORDS motherhood; care; affect; anxiety; responsibility; gender; race; class; labour; reproduction

In April 2014, the Institute for Precarious Consciousness (with the CrimethInc. Ex-Workers' Collective) published a zine called “We Are All Very Anxious,” which argued that the dominant affect of contemporary capitalism is *anxiety*. The authors posited that in the prewar era the dominant affect was *misery*, as the working class struggled to achieve social minimums, but by the mid-twentieth century misery was replaced by *boredom*. Job security, welfare provision, and the strength of the labour movement quelled misery for many workers but repetitive jobs had resulted in workers lacking a sense of purpose. In contemporary capitalist society, the authors argued, “anxiety has spread from its previous localized locations (such as sexuality) to the whole of the social field” (Institute for Precarious Consciousness, 2014, n.p.). As a response to precarity, the authors asserted, anxiety serves to limit resistance by inciting “generalized hopelessness” without escape (despite

Correspondence Address: Amanda Watson, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, AQ 5054, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Dr., Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6; Email: adwatson@sfu.ca

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empty promises of release through capitalist consumption). For the zine authors, anxiety is the combined result of precarity and omnipresent surveillance – together making for the constant examination and classification of bodies inculcated with neoliberal versions of success.

Although the way that the Institute for Precarious Consciousness generalizes periods of capitalist history means that its assertions apply unevenly to already disenfranchised folks like women, people of colour, LGBTQ folks, and people living with disabilities, the idea that all-encompassing anxiety is “today’s public secret” is echoed in feminist and queer theories of affect. Queer theorists of affect, in particular, have intervened in popular psychology’s understanding of anxiety as an individual psychological disorder characterized by “worried thoughts” (American Psychological Association, n.d.) and often blamed on “poor adaptation” (Institute for Precarious Consciousness, 2014). Instead, they have presented anxiety as a shared, political, and “ordinary feeling” embedded in the “ordinary circumstances” of the current neoliberal moment (Cvetkovich, 2012). Feminist critiques have also drawn attention to how public anxiety, understood as symptomatic of contemporary “risk culture” or our “insecure times,” disproportionately affects mothers and creates unattainable cultural expectations of motherhood (Villalobos, 2014; Wolf, 2010).

With the understanding that there exists a shared, public anxiety that is often misconstrued as private, I am interested in the labours of contemporary mothers as an issue of social justice. Mothers are understood as having a social responsibility to care for and about the well-being of others in addition to resisting the effects of their own anxiety. In this article, I bring feminist literature on anxiety and happiness to bear on the responsibilities of contemporary mothers as they are represented in a series of popular editorial publications. By analyzing these publications, I aim to deepen the interdisciplinary dialogue between theories of affect and theories of care work by examining how popular representations of maternal responsibility reflect a contemporary “affect of motherhood” and indicate specifically that mothers might be “coming undone” under the weight of a shared, political anxiety that they are encouraged to feel individually. To this end, I define “coming undone” as the experience of struggling with feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression in the face of multiple labour burdens and the pursuit of happiness; an unraveling that is due to competing demands that are nearly, if not entirely, impossible for most women to achieve. I posit that the uniquely complex, competing labours of contemporary mothers, and mothers’ complicity in and resistance to these labours, can only be understood in the context of public anxiety – responsibility for which is unequally distributed among social groups. Further, I consider what is at stake for the most disenfranchised women when it comes to recognizing and resisting today’s intensified forms of maternal responsibility.

Following a word on method, I begin with an overview of affect theory, expounding Sara Ahmed’s (2010) work on “happiness objects” and the

relationship between happiness and productivity. Responding to this special issue's aim to "re-think concepts and practices of intimacy and embodied care through a wide spectrum of twenty-first-century intimate labours and their associated economies" (Lee & Doucet, 2016, n.p.), I use Ahmed and her contemporaries to examine how theories of affect that underscore the climate of anxiety illustrate a precarious affective terrain for both privileged mothers and already disenfranchised mothers, including racialized women, women with disabilities, women in conflict with the law, and queer and trans women. I follow by mapping a particular discussion of women's feelings around work-family conflict and reproduction as it has appeared in editorial content in the popular press beginning in the early 2000s. This brief historical tracing sets the stage for my analysis of two popular discourses of maternal responsibility: "opting out" and "leaning in." Linking anxiety and happiness, I show how, in the governance of motherhood, incitements to opt out of or lean in to various forms of labour precipitate anxiety – since no arrangement of labour guarantees a happy future. Finally, I conclude by arguing that these irreconcilable and often incoherent provocations provide evidence for a contemporary "affect of motherhood" as a social justice issue, as mothers are coming undone by their multiple, competing labours.

Method

I explore representations of mothers' affective terrain at the site of news media following media studies scholar Colleen Cotter (2001, p. 423), who demonstrates how the news is increasingly consumable and widely distributed, and thus provides a "natural data source" for researchers exploring discourse and culture. The popular editorial articles sampled in this paper are drawn from my doctoral research (Watson, 2016), in which I performed critical feminist discourse analysis of an archive of media reports published over six years (2007-2013) in Canada and the United States.¹ Using the keyword "motherhood," I examined four national print newspapers (*USA Today*, the *New York Times*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *Globe and Mail*) for their representation of maternal responsibility.² Following title and content analyses of thousands of articles, three broad themes emerged: women's

¹ I relied primarily on feminist approaches to critical discourse analysis (CDA), which aim to unpack complex ideologies sustaining gendered, racialized, and classed social hierarchies (see Lazar, 2007). My research built on qualitative methods of feminist theorizing by Jasbir Puar (2007), Ann Cvetkovich (2003), Sara Ahmed (2010), and cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997), as I studied media representations for their statements "about a particular topic at a particular historical moment" (Foucault, 1990, p. 291).

² The *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail* are Canada's two widest circulating daily newspapers, both of which feature stories about motherhood and family life. *The New York Times* and *USA Today* have the second and third highest daily circulation rates in the United States, after the *Wall Street Journal*. I omitted the latter because of its emphasis on business and international affairs and its tendency to not run stories about motherhood or family.

work-family conflict or role strain, infant feeding, and the relationship between reproduction and women's sense of well-being. To underscore the affect of motherhood, in this paper I have selected a series of representations from the third theme that highlight women's responsibility for good feelings in the context of public anxiety. The primary texts featured here were not only circulated and evaluated by numerous major mainstream news media outlets at the time of publication, but have served as pivoting points for other subjects of editorial coverage long after the representations themselves ceased to be circulated. They include editorials drawn from the *The New York Times*, *Harvard Business Review*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, and *Time*, as well as several best-selling books from commercial presses. I stage the contributions in a conversation spanning over a decade among the following ten authors: Sylvia Ann Hewlett (2002a, 2002b), Lisa Belkin (2003), Claudia Wallis (2004), Caitlin Flanagan (2004), Judith Warner (2005, 2013), Lori Gottlieb (2008, 2010), Hanna Rosin (2010, 2012), Sheryl Sandberg (2013), Brigit Schulte (2014), and Anne-Marie Slaughter (2012, 2015).

This sampling is selective and not intended to be exhaustive, but rather aims to juxtapose particular messages within the theme of the affect of motherhood to show its various competing, incoherent discursive threads and their disciplinary effects. Tracing the discourses of opting out and leaning in allows me to unfold the gendered duty to resist anxiety by performing multiple competing labours. For this reason, I am drawn to a selection of editorial publications dating back to 2001, when a conversation surged around census data showing that highly educated women were staying home with children. These texts have received attention from other scholars and from major publication vehicles, and I present them here as flagship moments, or "snapshots," following the genealogical analytical strategy of Jean Carabine (2001). From a critical feminist perspective, these representations have ideological consequences for particular groups, and their presentation alongside feminist theories of affect, anxiety, and motherhood reveal new meaning about the affect of contemporary motherhood. Thus, for this analysis, I underscore specific references to both the responsibilities or expectations and the affective experiences of mothers, and highlight which mothers are presumed part of this discussion and which mothers are necessarily excluded.

Public Anxiety, Unequally Distributed

In her acclaimed book, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Ann Cvetkovich (2012) presents a way of thinking about feelings as public rather than private. Cvetkovich seeks in part to provide systematic accounts of power by describing "*how capitalism feels*" (2012, p. 11; emphasis in original), framing sensation and feeling as "the register of historical experience." Taking up "depression" as her "keyword" in order to describe the affective dimensions

of contemporary everyday life, Cvetkovich follows queer cultural theorist Lisa Duggan, who suggests that as neoliberal economic policy shrinks the public sphere, the affective life of the private family bears an increasing burden. Similarly, Cvetkovich's theory of depression describes what neoliberalism feels like from the vantage of ordinary life: rife with feelings of despair and anxiety that are barely discernable because they structure "just the way things are" (2012, p. 14).

Going beyond a general description of the feelings resulting from neoliberal economic policy, feminist theorists of affect (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Cvetkovich, 2012) have illuminated how public feelings – and specifically *responsibility* for these feelings – are unequally distributed by race, gender, disability, and class. Accepting that public feelings may be experienced differently across social groups, of particular interest here is how social groups may be disproportionately charged with responsibility for producing and alleviating the public feelings associated with neoliberalism. As Sara Ahmed (2010) explains in *The Promise of Happiness*, negativity comes to characterize or stigmatize bodies that cannot or will not appear willing to "inherit the future" through reproduction and the pursuit of future happiness. If women are promised future happiness by having children – at the "right" time and under the "right" circumstances (Watson, 2016) – then women who are seen as failing or refusing to reproduce, or mothers who fail at self-care or fail to generate happiness for their children through care, are in some ways akin to the stigmatized queer or disabled body: queer to the ideal of a neoliberal futurism, thus rendered "unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane" (Edelman, 2004, p. 4). In this context, maternal bodies are disproportionately impelled to pursue and reproduce happiness for themselves and others as a way of subduing the effects of the private secret of public anxiety.

Growing public interest in measures of well-being and popular media preoccupation with the causes of physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being are part of what Ahmed (2010) has termed the "happiness turn." Ahmed explains that the proliferation of books and courses containing self-help discourses and therapeutic cultures, particularly since 2005, has created a "happiness industry" where "happiness is both produced and consumed through these books, accumulating value as a form of capital" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 3). The happiness turn is also seen in changing governance frameworks, as governments increasingly turn to well-being indices as goals to supplement, or in some cases supplant, GDP-based measures of national development (Ahmed, 2010; Kemp, 2012). Ahmed is suspicious of this shift, explaining that the quest for happiness is a futurist orientation. She writes: "to pin hopes on the future is to imagine happiness as what lies ahead for us" (2010, p. 160). Future happiness thus becomes the moral guideline for how to live in the present, and there are negative consequences for individuals who seem disinclined to reach their potential happy life. That is, the promise of future happiness is tied to the endless labour of resisting anxiety in the present, and

this obsession with future happiness overshadows the anxiety produced in its wake.

For women, an obvious investment in the future is through responsible reproductive and care work. Mothers are compelled to secure their future well-being and that of their children through their individual reproductive behaviours. In the happiness turn, mothers whose behaviours are judged as failing to provide their children with the most favorable opportunities for future health and well-being are deemed ignorant, stubborn, or naïve. By the same token, if mothers' devotion to paid labour suffers as a result of their care responsibilities, mothers risk being cast as undeserving of participation in paid labour, and thus unworthy of economic sustainability. In these fraught circumstances, the way mothers must uniquely navigate the cultural expectation to secure well-being for their children and for themselves through their multiple competing labours reveals how the affective life of the private family is an increasing burden in precarious, neoliberal times.

One of Ahmed's key conceptual contributions in *The Promise of Happiness* is her notion of "happiness objects." Happiness objects are culturally sanctioned assets or goals that signal the correct way to pursue good feelings and a good life. These "objects" might be normative institutions like marriage or the family, and they come to represent the good, moral way of living. As Ahmed notes, citing popular psychologist Martin Seligman's work on "authentic happiness," we now have "guideposts" for the "good life," which for Ahmed means the gratification promised to be delivered at the end of a path of striving – an end where anxiety and depression promise to melt away. This is a cruelly optimistic relationship to the future (see Berlant, 2011) because the good life is elusive and always out of reach; still, the happiness literature of positive psychology insists that we have indicators of well-being, often referred to in terms of "wellness," for which to strive.

The conditions resulting from the confluence of neoliberal welfare policies, general economic instability, and the gendered labour contract (Vosko, 2010) that unfairly distributes the burdens of paid and unpaid labour among men and women, virtually guarantee that there is no respite from pursuit of *some* version of the good life. Even if families recognize and resist frenzied pressure toward happiness in the happiness turn, they are insecure and thus they must keep resisting public anxiety and its effects by striving for their own well-being.

Ahmed's happiness objects also pertain to the consumption of intimacies as they are couched in the rhetoric of choice. As Ahmed notes, the ideals of "freedom" (to make "choices") and happiness are commonly linked, so making a "choice" is in fact a happiness object itself. There is evidence of this ideal throughout the happiness industry, as consumers are instructed to make particular choices now to guarantee their future happiness. For example, a 2009 article in *Psychology Today* asks, "Has the happiness frenzy of the past few years left you sad and anxious? Herein we report the surest ways to find well-being" (Flora, 2009, n.p.). Here, the non-attainment of happiness is the

very source of anxiety. The article includes almost no surprises as it lists various guideposts for the good life: acting toward goals, confronting negative feelings, practicing mindfulness, living your values, and – in a strangely material twist – having enough money to live comfortably. Although the latter is rarely a matter of individual choice, in this literature, if income is a happiness object, we should be able to (choose to) pursue it.

Related to the notion of happiness objects, another of Ahmed's key tenets is the relationship between happiness and *productivity*. Happiness, she explains, is an individual responsibility and a life project, as well as an instrument for achieving greater happiness: "a way of maximizing your potential of getting what you want, as well as being what you want to get" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 10). If happy people are more optimistic, altruistic, adaptable to change, and physically and mentally healthy, as social psychology studies find (see Ahmed, 2010), it follows from a capitalist perspective that happy people are better workers. Not surprisingly, reported happiness intersects with markers of affluence and privilege, or as Ahmed says, "the face of happiness...looks rather like the face of privilege" (2010, p. 11). For example, happy people are typically found in wealthy countries, are married, have healthy social networks, are part of "majority groups," are mentally and physically healthy, and are experiencing control of their lives (Veenhoven, 1991, as cited in Ahmed, 2010). Thinking about happiness as a capitalist asset, then, it follows that workplaces would not favour mothers' coming undone with feelings of anxiety or depression when pursuing their responsibility to juggle competing labour burdens. Put another way, mothers who come undone with bad feelings, or simply mothers who "take care" at home, are understood by employers and the state more broadly as liabilities to capitalist productivity. The invisible, emotional labour of managing or disguising feelings of coming undone with multiple labours in pursuit of happiness partly characterizes the affect of motherhood and must be visibilized as essential to today's "public secret" as a matter of social justice.

The happiness turn can be understood as a capitalist response to the shared public secret that everybody is anxious. Ahmed's theory of happiness rests on the logic that happiness is the pursuit of something that is always out of reach. It is never something that exists in the present, but something that we are pursuing; even the happiness experienced through nostalgia is past-oriented, leaving the present to be filled with other feelings like anxiety or anticipation. Considering the subject position of mothers in these conditions, who are incited toward responsible reproduction and particular anti-risk parenting practices, mothers are tasked with resisting precarity in unique ways. In her chapter on "Happy Futures," Ahmed briefly addresses how the pursuit of happiness intersects with maternity and cultural expectations around reproduction. This idea is consistently echoed in popular editorial work on women's fertility, childbearing "choices," and work-life balance maneuvers.

Beyond considering how affective responsibilities are gendered and sexualized, Ahmed (2010) also shows how affects are distributed unevenly by

race and migrant status. She argues that “others,” or those who fall outside of the national imaginary (Thobani, 2007), are stuck with the negative affect of fear, disgust, or hate – in refusing to pursue the happiness ideal in recognizable ways, they not only fail happiness, they *cause unhappiness*. Drawing on bell hooks, Ahmed (2010) gives the example of how the mere presence of black women in feminist circles is understood as killing the joy of white feminists, as their black bodies serve to remind white women of violent colonial legacy and white supremacy. Therefore, the happiness duty disproportionately falls on racialized women. Similarly, Puar (2007), Halberstam (2011), and Cvetkovich (2003), among other affect and queer theorists, theorize the various ways in which bodies become understood as threatening to nationhood at least in part due to their refusal to take on the cultural project of pursuing well-being. For Puar, negative and positive affect both infuse and come to define the cultural project of patriotism, as she views good and bad feelings in the context of the “twin mechanisms of normalization and banishment that distinguish the terrorist from the patriot” (2007, p. 37). In his work on queer temporality, Halberstam imagines negative affect as implicated in a queer temporality where queer bodies threaten futurist orientations to productivity, the reproduction of nuclear family, and the intergenerational passing of wealth. For Cvetkovich, negative affect is an aftermath of trauma and an ongoing struggle against speed-up and the neoliberal demand to be productive. A common thread here is the understanding that those who do not pursue the ideal – in this case happiness, or at least not-anxiety, and productivity – are marked as outsiders who threaten the stability of already established ideals. This responsibility to pursue orientations to both capitalist productivity and the heteronormative nuclear family fall disproportionately on mothers, or women who are expected to have children. It is in this context that popular editorials on maternal affect and responsibility make sense as an ongoing disciplining of gendered labour.

Anxiety, “Opting Out,” and “Leaning In”

Mothers have long been understood as objects of state action intended to reproduce a healthy society (Albanese, 2006; Finkel, 2006; Lister, 1997) and women’s responsibilities for social reproduction are well-documented in feminist research (Tronto, 1993, 2013; Vosko, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Social scientists have also shown how mothers and pregnant women are uniquely made responsible for the curing of social ills beyond their control through their individual behaviours, including, for example, solving problems of infant mortality and “obesity” through breastfeeding (Nathoo & Ostry, 2009; Parker, 2014; Watson, 2016). It is said that a mother’s work is never done, and this is becoming truer in precarious circumstances. As adult women are encouraged and disciplined into paid labour under ableist neoliberal

conditions (Daly, 2011; Giullari & Lewis, 2005; Lister, 2003), as public panic circulates around the reduced fertility rates of some women and not others,³ as middle-class domestic labour is increasingly outsourced (Glenn, 2010; Hochschild, 2012; Tronto, 2013) – often to underpaid migrant women (Mohanty, 2013; Vosko, 2010; Williams, 2006) – the sexual division of labour and dated models of welfare provision remain stubbornly entrenched (Hochschild, 2012; Kershaw, 2005; Lister, 2003). In these unwinnable circumstances, women’s labour burden remains complicated, invisibilized, and inadequately understood, and women’s responsibilities remain riveted to a responsibility for care.

Contemporary representation of mothers’ feelings around their multiple labours frequently point to the “choice” – itself a happiness object and condition of the affect of motherhood – to either “opt out” or “lean in.” The discussion of women opting out of the workforce to have and care for children is not new, but was reinvigorated in the United States following the *Fertility of American Women* report published in 2001, which found that the US fertility rate hovered just below replacement. The report also found that, for the first time since women entered the workforce in large numbers in the 1980s, married women with college degrees were staying home with young children.

In response to this finding, economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett, founding president of the Center for Work-Life Policy in New York, published her landmark book, *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children* (2002a),⁴ to largely positive reviews (see Vanessa G., 2002). The author and her book were profiled widely in *Time* and the *New York Times*, and on *60 Minutes*, and the *Today Show* (see Walsh, 2002). Hewlett, citing Census Bureau data, described declining birth rates among predominantly affluent white women as a crisis, and advised women to get married and have children before it is too late and regret takes hold – an incitement which sounds precisely like Ahmed’s description of pursuing happiness objects, and which was repeated in the popular media by several of her contemporaries for years to come (Caplan, 2008). In a condensed version of her argument for the *Harvard Business Review*, Hewlett (2002b) examined the “age-old business of having babies,” pointing to the struggles of the “top 10% of women measured in earning power,” the “painful well-kept secret” of childless, high-achieving women, and their “creeping nonchoice” wherein “reality and regret” collide.

³ Douglas Todd for the *Vancouver Sun* bolstered racist anti-immigration sentiment, warning readers about the relatively high fertility of Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh women in Metro Vancouver compared to their Christian counterparts. See, “High birthrate among immigrant women has implications for Canada” (Todd, 2013a). This sentiment mirrors that of the white supremacist fringe publication, *The New Observer*, which echoed racist anti-immigration sentiment in, “If White Americans don’t start having babies, the US will vanish by 2011” (Todd, 2013b)

⁴ Released in the United Kingdom as *Baby Hunger: The New Battle for Motherhood* (2002).

Hewlett's work presents maternal affective terrain as imbued with pain and regret, through the familiar profiles of mothers with the considerable economic privilege to make choices. At stake in this conversation are the guideposts for the good life, if the "reality" for even the most privileged mothers is "nonchoice" when it comes to their labours. Hewlett's observations point to a relatable and potentially worsening social problem of gender asymmetry in the workplace and the home, and have the potential to form radical critique of both women's responsibilities and public anxiety; her description of women's reported anguish over career-versus-family calculations could be used to advocate structural change like universal childcare or reduced workweeks. Instead, Hewlett concludes with advice for combatting the "crisis of childlessness," which we know is implicitly about white women since women of colour in the US have fertility rates above the replacement. The idea that women should get married and have children to be healthier and happier, and that they should do so before the age of 35, was advice for white, heterosexual, able-bodied women, disguised as universal advice for all women. For Hewlett, marriage and reproduction before a certain age are the happiness objects when freedom to make other choices wanes. Women who do not desire children or cannot have children are effectively erased, and the task to reverse this fertility "crisis" is again assigned to individual women.

Opting Out

A year later, in 2003, when well-known *New York Times* columnist Lisa Belkin's "Opt-Out Revolution" ran to an outpouring of polarized commentary, "career-women-go-home" articles were already fifty years old (Graft, 2007). But Belkin's piece (and newly-coined "opt-out revolution") signaled an energized public discussion. By presenting the new (2000) census data and building on Hewlett's take on childless (white) women, as well as the work of other social scientists (Hochschild, 1989; Hrdy, 2000; Williams, 2000), Belkin crafted a cautionary tale about executive women leaving the workforce. Belkin's essay told the stories of a few exceptional Princeton graduates who stayed home to raise children instead of pursuing high-income careers. It was the most e-mailed piece in the *Times* that year, and the language of "opting out" has remained part of the popular discussion of women's labours. Here again, women are tasked to choose happiness over anxiety by prioritizing reproductive and care labour "before it's too late." In Belkin's sample, quitting paid labour is the happiness object, which allows us to see how the affect of motherhood is at least partly characterized by the feelings involved in managing opposing directives – making an impossible "choice."

The question of how women should navigate their dual responsibility to their family's well-being and the workplace may have been well-worn in

journalism and in scholarly writing at the time (see Hattery, 2001; Hochschild, 1989, 2012),⁵ but with new evidence of more educated women staying home with children than before, these works have increasingly presented women's "choice" to stay home with children in affective terms: as a combined effect of job dissatisfaction and a presumably innate and affective "pull to motherhood." Recalling Ahmed's (2010) notion of happiness objects and Cvetkovich's (2012) positioning of feelings as public but secret, Belkin's interpretation is such that individuals are expected to resist public anxiety through their individual reproductive and care choices. The Princeton graduates whose stories Belkin told (2003, n.p.) affirmed the emotionally disparate terrains of paid work and unpaid care work, as they connected paid jobs to power, status, and machismo, while they associated maternity with feelings of grace, escape, "sanity, balance, and a new definition of success." "Sanity" and "balance" sound like perfectly reasonable desires, as does the affective "pull" presumably responsible for a group of exceptionally privileged women prioritizing motherhood. But this description, as it hinges on a subgroup of women who elect to pursue care work over paid work, fails to challenge the disparate experiences of public anxiety in relation to privilege and the disproportionate responsibility of different social groups to quell public anxiety, or to make maternal affect visible as a matter of social justice.

In 2004, award-winning journalist Claudia Wallis made "the case for staying home" in *Time* magazine.⁶ Explaining the first-ever drop-off of white married women from the workplace and the increase of stay-at-home mothers with graduate degrees, Wallis describes a "reluctant revolt" by professional- and managerial-class women who are "less willing to play the juggler's game," especially under "high-speed mode." Wallis also notes the affective sensation of "speed-up," and a social will (and individual "unwillingness") for mothers to optimize a combination of incongruent activities. For Wallis, highly educated stay-at-home mothers choose family over career responsibilities in an effort to reject bad feelings of stress. The women are presented as not regretting leaving the workplace. Instead, they are shown to be resisting public feelings of anxiety by securing happiness through the guidepost of care work, where they find "expected delights" and "enormous relief" at home. In line with the broader (neoliberal) tendency to frame women's labours in terms of individual women's choices, Wallis does not address the impossibility of responsible reproduction under individualist welfare regimes, or what is at stake for women who cannot afford to reject the incitement to juggle career and motherhood. Instead, Wallis concludes optimistically by surmising that corporate culture might eventually become more flexible to combat the "brain drain," allowing women to exit and re-enter the workplace around the time when they are having children.

⁵ For an example of what popular writing on this same topic looked like in 1986, see George Gilder, "Women in the workforce" (Gilder, 1986).

⁶ This essay was widely circulated and is still highly cited. See, for example, Day & Downs (2009), Herr (2009), Smith (2014), Warner (2013).

The idea of the choice, either to refrain from or to engage in the pursuit of good feelings, is echoed in Wallis's affect of motherhood; she describes a sensation of being overwhelmed, stressed, or anxious in striving for balance that is paired with a choice to seek relief. Her work also avoids challenging the foundations of the capitalist economy because the market is seen to undergird women's choice to opt-out in the first place. Wallis, like many eminent voices in popular discussion of women's labour, criticizes the social pressure placed on women to pursue demanding careers and birth and raise children at the same time. Her position (following from popular feminist works that universalize the experiences of privileged women), was actively contested in feminist editorials outside the mainstream, particularly after the rise of Sheryl Sandberg and Anne-Marie Slaughter as purported spokeswomen for feminism. Wallis is not, nor do we expect her to be, interested in the question of what happens when capitalist ventures fail, nor is she interested in the families for whom capitalism consistently fails. The popular conversation in the early 2000s suggested that most women could choose to prioritize family, following the guideposts of the good life, and they would not regret it; they would feel relieved. As well, women were encouraged to have faith that corporate interests will align with their own interests: that corporations will look out for their future interest as their goals collide – by providing “on-ramps,” or flexible options for upgrading skills and getting back to work. The successful individual mothers in Wallis, Belkin, and Hewlett's stories might be experiencing negative affect in pursuit of balance, but they are seen as having options within the status quo, which they reproduce by making a “choice.” This story of choices repeatedly erases deeper feminist critique.

“An Existential Discomfort”

This discussion of the feelings wrought by women's career and family conflict continued in the commercial press with Judith Warner's *Perfect Madness* (2005). Warner (2005, p. 3) explores that “caught-by-the-throat feeling” that mothers are always failing, drawing on interviews she conducted with wealthy women married to men in high-earning positions before the financial market crash. Through discussions of the minutiae of these women's daily lives, Warner (2005) and her interviewees arrive at a structure of feeling that they refer to as *this mess*: “It's not depression. It's not oppression. It's a mix of things, a kind of *too-muchness*. An existential discomfort” (p. 4; emphasis in original). With the spotlight on affect, the lines between affective motherhood and guideposts for the good life are necessarily blurred. While the women in Warner's account distinguish their feelings from depression or oppression, it is helpful to think of this “too-muchness” in the context of Cvetkovich's (2012, p. 1) notion of depression as a cultural and social phenomenon in which it feels as though things are “no longer working.”

Cvetkovich further suggests that it might be possible to contend with these structures of feeling in order to understand social problems and pursue political activism. Warner's "too-muchness" might suggest a confluence of fear and despair, a symptom of public anxiety, where "juggling" labours is not serving the promised good life, and instead has left a "mess." The stories chronicled in Warner's (2005) book question what these women call their "neuroses" (p. 38) and general sense of feeling worried and overwhelmed. Noting a combination of maternal "promise with politics, feminism with 'family values,' science and sound bites and religion and, above all, *fear*," (Warner, 2005, p. 8; emphasis in original) it seems increasingly clear that these bad feelings are the direct inheritance of precarity and the neoliberal intensification of family responsibilities (Duggan, 2004). Warner even uses the language of "promise," reminiscent of Ahmed's "promise of happiness," to describe how following cultural expectations of juggling labours ultimately fails to provide good feelings. Caitlin Flanagan (2004) put maternal affect plainly in an article in *The Atlantic* about "staking out her turf" as a stay-at-home mother. She writes: "I felt anxious about the whole thing – very, very anxious" (Flanagan, 2004, n.p.).

The debate over women's labour and emotional well-being continued along similar analytics – of choice, stress, regret, and "what's best" – through the financial market crash of 2007-2008, with some of the scholarly and mainstream media responding to changes in the demographics of the labour force. Not all authors were sympathetic about the subject position of women in the face of public anxiety. For example, Lori Gottlieb intensified the conversation about women's labours with her inflammatory and heterosexist article and book of the same name, *Marry Him* (2008, 2010), which advised career-successful young women to marry less successful men they do not love in order to reproduce "before it's too late," presumably because avoiding regret about not having children is key to women's sense of fulfillment. Clearly absent from Gottlieb's perspective are reproductive access issues like the accessibility of sperm banks for lesbians, trans men and women, queer couples, single women, and heterosexually-partnered women whose male partners do not produce sufficient levels of sperm for conception. She simply directs all women to choose the path of least regret by settling for a man and having children.

Making a related argument among widespread discussion of new male unemployment after 2008, Hanna Rosin's *The End of Men* (2012) contends that since modern economies show preference to women's (piecemeal, part-time, "flexible," precarious) labour over men's labour, traditional gender order is now reversed to the detriment of not only men, but all of society. These arguments about an upside-down gender hierarchy are not supported by statistical evidence on metrics like income inequality, gendered violence, access to leadership positions, or bodily autonomy, and they are rooted in a sense of apprehension when conditions are precarious – with respect to labour, the traditional family, and the future of the economy. Rosin expresses

discomfort with white women's success in post-secondary education, an influx of education that is stratified by race, and with middle-class white women pursuing higher education, getting married later, having children later, and having fewer children. But Rosin only points to racial division in her argument using racism – the common demonization of black men – when she threatens that if this trend continues:

The whole country's future could look much as the present does for many lower-class African Americans: the mothers pull themselves up, but the men don't follow. First-generation college-educated white women may join their black counterparts in a new kind of middle class, where marriage is increasingly rare. These changes are not merely spreading around the fringes; they are fundamentally altering the core of middle-class life... Middle America is starting to look like high-school-drop-out America. (Rosin, 2012, pp. 101-102)

Some contributors to this discussion attempted to nuance the notion that women are doing better than men, but the guideposts for the good life – in this case a less anxious life for *everyone* – include women getting married, reproducing in good time, and “opting out” (or perhaps more aptly put, backing down). Rosin and Gottlieb wax nostalgic for the promise of happiness for middle-class white women, and Rosin adds that this traditional social arrangement is also necessary for (heterosexual, white) men's ability to pursue the trappings of traditional masculinity.

(Not) “Having it All”

Affective stories about women's competing labours, what Jolynn Shoemaker (2012) dubbed the “new problem with no name,” continue to circulate. When Anne-Marie Slaughter, well-known academic and former Director of Policy Planning for the US State Department, published “Why Women Still Can't Have It All” (2012) in *The Atlantic*, it led to the magazine's widest circulation ever. In her article, she considers the complicated nature of women's feelings about their role in social reproduction via career, childbearing, and childrearing. She argues that the current organization of paid work is a problem for women who have families, even if they have significant economic and social resources. Although Slaughter's essay was criticized for its narrow representation of most women's circumstances, it signaled a conceptual shift in the discussion – from being about individual women choosing to opt out to focusing on the possibility of women and men “having it all” as families with equitable co-parenting partnerships, if American society and economics would just modernize. Critically, Slaughter (2012, n.p.) dispels the myth that “‘having it all’ is a matter of personal determination.” She parlayed her initial success into a 2015 book called *Unfinished Business: Women, Men, Work, Family*, in which she accepts the main feminist criticism of her first essay without defensiveness, writing: “I've

been called a privileged, wealthy, liberal white woman who cannot imagine the lives of the vast majority of women across the United States” (Slaughter, 2015, p. 99). Here, Slaughter advocates de-gendering care, and insists that child rearing must be granted higher social status in order for family and work life to change. Still, her work relies on the rhetoric of choice as a happiness object, and even though she acknowledges the lack of choice for women in the low-wage economy, she too-often advises relying on a (male) partner to share lead-parenting duties, side-stepping potential Marxist feminist critiques. While an important interruption of “lean in” rhetoric, Slaughter’s critique is only new in the context of the US commercial press. She echoes decades of feminist scholarly critique, often without attributing her views to radical sources, like Sylvia Federici or Simone de Beauvoir; as *Guardian* reviewer Helen Lewis (2015, n.p.) notes, Slaughter uses the “language of corporate empowerment seminars rather than Marxist critique.” In the context of the growth of widespread public anxiety in response to precarity, and the constant surveillance and classification of bodies, critiques that fail to undermine status quo individualism do not serve those women and mothers who are most disenfranchised, despite acknowledging their existence.

On the heels of Slaughter’s 2012 piece, journalist Judith Warner (2013) published a response to Belkin’s (2003) essay, arguing that “the opt-out generation wants back in.” Following up on *Perfect Madness*, Warner argued that the double burden is too much for women to manage, and further, that the focus on fertility rate trends and the “small demographic” of higher-income women who “opt out” of broader labour obscures both the struggles of poor women and the affect of “balancing” care work and paid work that is necessary for survival.⁷ Yet, Warner failed to challenge foundational assumptions about women’s bodies, about their desire for (heterosexual) partnership and children, and even their desire to “balance” anything. Examining only class as an indicator of exclusion from pursuing balance, Warner calls for flexibility through “focus-on-the-family” legislation (a troublesome term, given the sexist, homophobic, and racist Christian charity of the same name) to help workplaces become more “flexible” in an effort to retain women. This call, as it reflects the neoliberal expectation that both workplaces and workers remain flexible in order to keep up with changing markets and diverse corporate needs, advocates improving women’s positions within status quo political structures.

In her 2014 op-ed for the *New York Times*, “To Reduce Inequality, Start with Families,” Warner restates her claim that the nuclear family is the means to escape the double burden, and with it, anxiety. Far from queering kinship structures, problematizing the nuclear family unit, as feminists have done for decades (de Beauvoir, 1972; Collins, 1990; Firestone, 1970; Friedan, 1963; hooks 1992), or even considering children’s emotional development as

⁷ Warner has recently been joined by Slaughter (2015), who points to the myth of choice for most parents.

important for something other than their future performance as workers, and despite being one of the most critical voices in popular discussion, she leaves intact the systems that structure the most basic inequalities. Warner criticizes the *conditions* of women's double burden and argues for their subtle adjustment within the status quo by invoking a familiar liberal feminist strategy that socialist feminists and transnational feminists (Mohanty, 2003; 2013) have long overturned on the grounds that the status quo involves colonial legacy and white supremacist, patriarchal hierarchies of power.⁸

The opt-out discussion exalts women's choice to opt out of paid labour as a happiness object, leaving the organization and distribution of paid work under-examined. Similarly, the competing directive to lean in to work and outsource care, as I present below, leaves the organization of care work unchallenged. In the context of women's various labour choices depicted as happiness objects, the very decision to opt out or lean into competing labours causes the anxiety it promises to alleviate.

Leaning In

The directives to opt out for the sake of good feelings stands in stark contrast to Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's *lean in* philosophy that suggests women break through the glass ceiling by masculinizing their career personas. In her 2010 TED talk, "*Why We Have Too Few Women Leaders*," Sandberg framed women's underrepresentation in executive offices as an injustice, calling for women to step up and "lean in." Even though Sandberg's talk addressed women's squeezed position between work and family responsibilities, and the associated emotional burden women inherit, she neglected to address structural oppression and institutionalized inequity, or the complicated and often precarious work status of mothers in paid employment. Like those arguing that women should "opt out" of paid labour, Sandberg identified the double burden as a problem of many individual women that requires individual women's solutions.

Sandberg's recommendations were taken seriously in the popular press, despite decades of feminist research and activism around women's disproportionate labour burdens and mothers' career disadvantages. Sandberg's subsequent book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013) became an instant bestseller, with reviews and commentary in major newspapers and talk shows across the continent. In 2013, Sandberg launched LeanIn.org, a powerful non-profit organization that "encourages women to continue to be active and ambitious in their careers even as they start their families" (2013, n.p.).

⁸ For a recent discussion, see Madeleine Schwartz's (2013) review for *Dissent Magazine* of Nancy Fraser's (2013) *Fortunes of Feminism*. Schwartz opens with a critique of *Lean In*, arguing that "white, professional women's work is at the center of contemporary feminist discourse" (n.p.) to the detriment of real, progressive, structural change.

The discussion of maternal affect has been taken up in journalistic and scholarly literatures respectively. Brigit Schulte (2014), a journalist for *The Washington Post*, authored a partial memoir: *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*. In it, Schulte maps the sense of racing time and corresponding anxiety, depression, and stress that characterize contemporary maternal care work. Whereas Schulte argues that contemporary motherhood is characterized by anxiety, sociologist Ana Villalobos (2014) broadens the sphere of anxiety by framing motherhood in the context of insecure times in general, identifying how the push to engage in intensified forms of mothering occurs in pursuit of national security. In her book, *Motherload: Making It All Better In Insecure Times*, Villalobos (2014) argues that women are encouraged to rely on the mother-child relationship for a sense of security because modern motherhood is characterized by insecurity; this leads to a deflection of real threats and encourages mothers to become preoccupied with how best to structure the mother-child relationship for their own well-being and the future health of families. Villalobos provides evidence of the intensification of mothering practices, which, in conversation with feminist theorists of affect, illustrates how the shared public secret of anxiety is disproportionately felt by and has disparate consequences for different social groups.

The “Affect of Motherhood” and the “Undone Mother”

I use the term “undone mother” to describe women and mothers who are faced with affective expectations that are culturally sanctioned by the popular discourse of responsible reproduction. Women who might be destined to become mothers, in the eyes of the commercial press (and, arguably, the state), are faced with a disproportionate responsibility for shared public anxiety. Navigating conflicting labours and insecure conditions while managing a smile is the “undone mother’s” responsibility, and her ability to perform this juggling act intersects with class, race, body, and sexuality. Editorial discussions of the emotional toil of balancing labour and care work, which are entwined with expectations of women’s reproductive labour, present an avenue through which women receive cultural messages about their responsibility to cure social ills.⁹

⁹ This critique is particularly vital in the context of renewed directives by the state that further responsabilize individual women for the future well-being of a society in precarious conditions. For example, in February 2016, the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released an infographic directing health practitioners to “assess a woman’s drinking,” “recommend birth control if a woman is having sex (if appropriate), not planning to get pregnant, and is drinking alcohol,” and “advise a woman to stop drinking if she is trying to get pregnant or not using birth control with sex.” Similarly tasking women with curbing a widespread public crisis, upon the outbreak of the Zika virus in 2015, the CDC advised women, and pregnant women in particular, to abstain from sex or otherwise protect themselves using contraceptives if their male sexual partner had travelled to areas with active Zika virus transmission.

Because mothers are encouraged to be optimistic about their children's future health, they "come undone" at the realization that it is out of their control. That is, the ways in which mothers are disproportionately induced to hope and strive toward well-being and security for their families is cruel because it is unattainable (Berlant, 2011), making their relationship to their reproductive labour stressful, ambivalent, and ultimately depressing. It is also cruel because the more mothers try to attain well-being for their children, the busier they become and the more money they spend, thus moving their attainment of happiness with their families even further away.

Hints of the consideration of anxiety as a public feeling are emerging in popular and scholarly literature. In 2002, Hewlett (2002a, p. ix), for example, framed her discussion of women opting out by remarking that in the "post-September 11 world, we may be better able to appreciate how much we need our children." Repeating her call to situate care at the centre of democratic political theory, care theorist Joan Tronto (2013, p. x) also couches the responsibility for care in an anxious culture defined by "deepening insecurities wrought by terrorist attacks and continued globalization under the conditions of neoliberalism." In these precarious times, Tronto warns that citizens have lost sight of their roles as intimate carers in households, which negatively impacts how citizens care for, about, and *with* each other, and about democracy. Feminist theorist Joan Wolf (2010) also situates responsibility in anxious times, referring to a "risk culture" that women are induced to navigate through their infant feeding behaviours. Scholars, journalists, and others point to structural concerns with women's "time crunch" between market labour and child bearing (Blair-Loy, 2005; Dempsey, Williams, & Slaughter, 2014; Dowd, 2005; Hirshman, 2005; Slaughter, 2012; Stone, 2008; Williams, 2000; 2012). There is evidence that a public conversation about women's affective experiences, particularly related to their ability to strike a balance of activities or "stay sane," ensues among and often about affluent white women – quite apart from discussions of the lives of women who are struggling to survive without financial security or access to basic needs such as health insurance or secure housing. Recalling Ahmed's reflections on happiness, even women who have the presumed requirements for a happy life are not free from anxiety.

Perceptions of the causes of a "madness" or "mess" experienced by some mothers – namely, the co-existing demands of high-powered jobs and intensified care directives from state-sponsored health agencies – do not probe the foundations of what it means to care in this contemporary moment. They do not consider the "madness" of demanding jobs that pay very little, that are precarious, that are unsafe, and that require long hours and commutes on public transit at irregular hours. They also do not consider what it means to not work for reasons other than choice – due to chronic pain, depression, disability, or incarceration, for example. Instead, most explanations of maternal anxiety, stress, and "too-muchness" are imbued with assumptions about mothers' whiteness, fitness, heteronormativity, and affluence.

Exclusive reliance on such women's stories not only constructs an ideal woman who is positioned to, at minimum, navigate the demands of capitalism without threatening her children's immediate safety, but indicates that even mothers with the most race, class, sexual, and bodily privilege are toiling under an affective burden. Thus, the unique affective consequence of public anxiety for mothers, as represented in popular discussion, is that some women are coming undone by the promise of happiness. Whereas some women might be granted a "pass" by relying on a spouse for financial or parenting support, mothers who cannot pursue responsible reproductive care labour in the face of competing labour demands are left alone, with negative implications for their social inclusion if they fail to pursue and identify with the guideposts for the good life.

Conclusion

Affect and queer theorists have long criticized the idea of futurist investments in social and biological reproduction to secure good feelings. In her critique of the cultural promise of happiness, Ahmed (2010, p. 184) argues that children "bear the brunt of this fantasy," and that women who do not have children become the subject of blame for denying hope for a utopian future. She explains that, "however we read this idea of a pointless existence without children, the anxiety expressed is that the future as an idea has been lost" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 184). In this discourse, reproductive care labour (by some) is connected to hope, and at the same time, women's good feelings are connected to reproduction. Public anxiety or insecurity, though tied here to women's responsibility for human reproduction, is hardly the product of stories about declining fertility rates alone. Yet, as popular editorial discussions of women's labour "choices" imply, to pursue career ambitions at the expense of having children, or to increase maternity and infant risks by "delaying" childbearing, equates to a supposed "refusal to be optimistic about the 'right things' in the right kind of way" (Ahmed 2010, p. 162). If we are not seen as concerned enough about the survival of the species through reproductive labour, nor, for example, by campaigning against climate change by boycotting corporate power, or by protesting government inaction on matters of social justice, we are seen as stubbornly against it. Whether women resist the maternal responsibility for alleviating society's anxiety or are complicit in the maternal pursuit of happiness effects, the distribution of both good and bad feelings in a society that continues to assign blame for a shared public secret to individuals based on their choices, the most disenfranchised women will continue to bear the brunt of precarity, with negative consequences for the survival of themselves and their families.

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