

Hamacher and Hankey's Supervision: On Motherhood and Surveillance

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Book Review

Review of Hamacher, Sophie, and Jessica Hankey, Eds. 2023. *Supervision: On Motherhood and Surveillance*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

200 pp. US\$35.00. Paperback. ISBN: 9780262047814.

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Everyone has a story to tell about motherhood, yet *Supervision: On Motherhood and Surveillance* puts together these narratives in what might be the most poetic, exquisite, and imaginative way that one can possibly think of. Edited by Sophie Hamacher and Jessica Hankey, the book is a collection of academic articles, narrative stories, poems, photos, artworks, and, most importantly, dialogues with mothers across disciplines—scholars, writers, lawyers, filmmakers, photographers, artists, activists, etc. With contributions by forty-eight authors and eighteen artists, the book explores how the experiences of mothering and motherhood have been subjected to different forms of surveillance—mother watching child, child being watched, and mother being watched. From the early stages of pregnancy, to the delivery processes, to the raising of the child, the narrative shows the pervasive surveillance that defines modern motherhood. This omnipresent watching spans from medical technologies in prenatal care and assisted reproduction to digital baby monitoring tools in homes, necessitating a desire and anxiety around constant vigilance for mothers. With real-life examples from the contributors, the book demonstrates how profoundly surveillance is infused into every aspect of motherhood, revealing both the oppressive and empowering facets of being under supervision.

Set primarily in the context of the US with some European cases, this book critically questions and confronts the conventional views of motherhood that are often based on white, middle-class ideals. It examines how these standards have shaped the surveillance practices, expectations, and severity imposed on mothers from other backgrounds. The scope and diversity of identities explored in the book are notably broad and impactful—it not only highlights the particular struggles faced by black mothers, who have historically been “sexualized, demonized, and policed” (92) but also covers the deeply marginalized narratives surrounding medical and state violence against incarcerated mothers, transnational migrant mothers, teenage black mothers, transgender mothers, and Native mothers. Rather than constructing a singular, unified argument, the book’s unique dialogue format allows for in-depth conversations with individuals who are either part of or closely work with these communities, guided by questions such as: How do mothering and motherhood differ? Can surveillance be perceived as a form of care? What implications does surveillance have for children’s development? And what role does technology play in shaping these dynamics? Some contributors view surveillance as inherently damaging to the concept of motherhood; others argue that motherhood has become overly commercialized because of the pressure under peer-to-peer surveillance. The book does not

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seek to convince readers of a single viewpoint but rather to showcase the complexity and nuances of what modern motherhood can embody.

Anyone looking for a concrete, serious academic theorization of motherhood and surveillance might be disappointed. However, this book is highly accessible for audiences without scholarly training, thanks to its engaging content that can be easily understood by a wider readership. The reading experience will be characterized by a mix of intriguing pleasure due to the novel and occasionally bizarre presentation, and the discomfort of confronting harsh realities. Some chapters in particular can be excellent resources for providing case studies and critical perspectives in both academic settings and broader public discussions. Given the diverse backgrounds of the contributors, readers can select the sections that they find most relevant to their own research and teaching needs. I would also argue that this book embodies a distinctively feminist methodological approach, especially in terms of how the arguments are presented and supported empirically, what styles of writing, knowledge, and epistemology are valued and included, and how intellectual conversations between people with very different experiences can take place based on shared identities, trauma, and empathy. Such a method makes the book not just an academic exploration but also a personal and communal reflection on the complexities of motherhood under surveillance. The relevance of the book cannot be overstated, especially in light of the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the US, as well as the ongoing discussions about reproductive rights and medical racism worldwide.

Despite offering valuable and diverse perspectives, this book sometimes falls short of delivering thorough analysis of the complex topics it chooses to explore. The book ambitiously covers many dimensions related to motherhood, addressing issues such as gender policing and family politics in Europe, the colonial legacy of state surveillance and violence in the US, and the legislative implication of pregnancy as a status. However, these critical topics are often lightly touched upon and feel somewhat underdeveloped. These discussions, while compelling and necessary, lack a solid foundation and interconnectedness that would more effectively tie these complex issues to the book's overarching themes of surveillance and motherhood. Additionally, while the book does an impressive job addressing a wide range of motherhood experiences under surveillance, it notably leaves out certain groups, particularly Asian women, who represent a significant portion of the female population in the US. Including their stories would have enriched the narratives with a more complete and nuanced view of how surveillance intersects with motherhood across different cultures and ethnicities. The absence of these perspectives feels like a missed opportunity to look deeper into the complexities of the subject. Lastly, in the dialogues, I sometimes found myself eager for more depth in the responses, but occasionally, the questions would shift direction without sufficient follow-up. This is not necessarily a flaw, but it can leave the readers feeling somewhat unfulfilled—as if interesting threads were introduced but not fully explored. This approach might keep the discussions dynamic, yet it also risks glossing over sophisticated topics that deserve more detailed examination.

In conclusion, *Supervision: On Motherhood and Surveillance* thoughtfully unpacks the layered experiences of motherhood under surveillance, strategically combining genuine heart-touching narratives with scholarly insights. While this book leaves space for more exploration, it opens up crucial conversations relevant to current societal debates.