

Suzanne Leonard, **Wife, Inc.: The Business of Marriage in the Twenty-First Century**, New York, NY: NYU Press, 2020, 272 pp., \$25.00 (paperback).

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Suzanne Leonard's **Wife, Inc.: The Business of Marriage in the Twenty-First Century** positions women's work as performing "wifedom" within widespread conceptions of neoliberal postfeminism. While marriage is increasingly seen as declining in social relevance in the United States, the author explores "female media culture" (p. 3)—as presented through popular television, film, literature, news, magazines, and advice culture—and demonstrates how the saturation of female representation in such mediums is heavily reliant on marriage. Leonard explains, "The wife has morphed into postfeminist media culture's most favored icon, one endlessly utilized to frame discussions of female life cycles" (p. 4).

The main objectives of the book aim to complicate postfeminist narratives surrounding marriage and the roles of wives in cultural, political, and economic environments in the 21st century by examining expectations (and the labor involved in meeting such expectations) of the modern wife as presented in media culture. By returning to historical feminist arguments of the visible work of wives as a public labor, Leonard expands on this notion, moving beyond the domestic, unpaid work in the private sphere, through discussions of emotional and bodily labor.

The organization of *Wife, Inc.* follows the chronological path that women take through wifedom, described as the "wife cycle," broken down into two sections. First, Leonard examines the negotiation of the marriage market through online dating norms and expectations as cultural formations that explain how economic logics of professionalization inform online dating (chapter 1). This is demonstrated through Leonard's reference of Heino, Ellison, and Gibbs' (2010) study on online dating sites that describes the targeting of selective consumers who know exactly what they want as allowing for "relationshopping" (p. 42). Then, she examines the process of marriage itself, exploring how wedding- and marriage-themed media discipline and train women to work both physically and emotionally to prove their sustainability as wife material (chapter 2). This mediatization of weddings, argues Leonard, serves to present the becoming of a bride into a "labor for respectability and deservingness" (p. 67).

Next, the ways in which wifedom is instrumentalized and monetized in various realms is examined through television shows—such as *Desperate Housewives*—alterations of traditional conceptions of the term "housewife" as an abstraction of feminine expectations that aims to simplify complicated gender dynamics (chapter 3). Furthermore, building on how women negotiate and perform as housewives, the next chapter



tackles the industry's role in this production, proposing that industry women perform such roles in accordance with network desires (chapter 4). Lastly, Leonard discusses how women in the political sphere, and fictionalized depictions of women in the political sphere, operate within a field ripe for the exploitation and manipulation of family values.

The structure and flow of *Wife, Inc.* is accessible and captivating, and the relatively limited methodological justifications throughout the several analyses suggests an audience geared toward scholars of feminist studies looking to learn more about the topic of media influence on constructing identity, or a broader university-educated public. One place of possible clarification is that while Leonard uses the term "postfeminist" throughout the book, often through criticizing assumed and naturalized perceptions of its presence in mainstream media, the complexities of the term are not clearly broken down for readers who may not be familiar with it as a problematic and contested descriptor.

Leonard positions the role of television (and popular media as a whole) as a cultural informant on the roles and duties of "housewives" as an abstract concept dating back to the 1950s (see chapter 3), solidifying the historical and present role of media influence over perceptions of acceptable performances of "wifedom" in American culture for decades. This conception of the "housewife"—an abstract term to begin with, that has historically held cultural weight—has been rebranded as "an empty signifier meant merely to signal status as a heterosexual woman disposed of performing the strictures of modern femininity" (p. 129).

The high cultural capital and class status affiliated with obtaining wife status (exacerbated by the increasingly stark class divisions affiliated with the marriage institute; p. 3), involves, Leonard suggests, "a set of labors steeped in the logics of professional cultures, in sync with the rhythms and ethos of the occupational sphere" (p. 20). Describing marriage as "entrepreneurship," whereas the marital laborer "puts her work in service of herself" (p. 20), women are expected to follow guiding rules to successfully obtain wifedom. Such rules can be understood, in part, through the management of one's brand. The construction of a wife's brand is emphasized through an analysis of reality television shows, where the norms and expectations are clearly laid out for audiences. Leonard explains that bridal and wedding shows "not only inculcate a specific idea of how brides must behave, but also confirm the risks and rewards of adhering to established protocols" (p. 100). In studying how mainstream media structures expectations and goals of wives, Leonard refers to Angela McRobbie's (2009) explanation for the continued value of 21st century marriage, stating that it is not founded on the "breadwinner" economic-based needs of past generations, but rather on the perceived cultural necessities of such—a process that continues efforts at maintaining and consolidating hegemonic masculinity (p. 5).

Beyond the roles wives play in 21st-century America, the cultural representations analyzed appear to construct images similar to those described by Betty Friedan (2001) in her book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan (2001), writing in the 1960s about American women in the 1950s, stated "fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the housewife-mother" (p. 92). Similarly, Leonard analyzed media representations of women in the "postfeminist" age and found that depictions often revolved around some form of pre-, ongoing, or postwife stage. Thus, expectations of women's lives are bound with some stage of wifedom, and performances of the femininity, emotional regulation, and self-presentation required to achieve such stages are simultaneously solidified.

While examining wife television, Leonard clarifies that, "I do not want to minimize the women appearing on these shows by framing them as cultural dupes who sell their emotional labor for low wages, nor do I seek to criticize the viewers of these shows" (p. 140). The emphasis (specifically in chapter 4 but also seen throughout) instead takes on a political-economic approach in examining "how various networks profit from wives' labor and interrogates why these portrayals carry cultural resonance" (p. 140).

While often comparing the roles of housewives today to those in the past as similarly confining, Leonard notes that the professionalization of femininity involves turning a complicated person into a wife, "a transition that is perhaps as constricting and emotionally dangerous as being a traditional housewife was once thought to be" (p. 131). Thus, Leonard concludes that entrepreneurial wifedom constrains women to roles presented to them through popular conceptions of housewives and femininity, and problematizes such mass assimilation through perceptions of "postfeminist" progression.

### References

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