mothering through precarity

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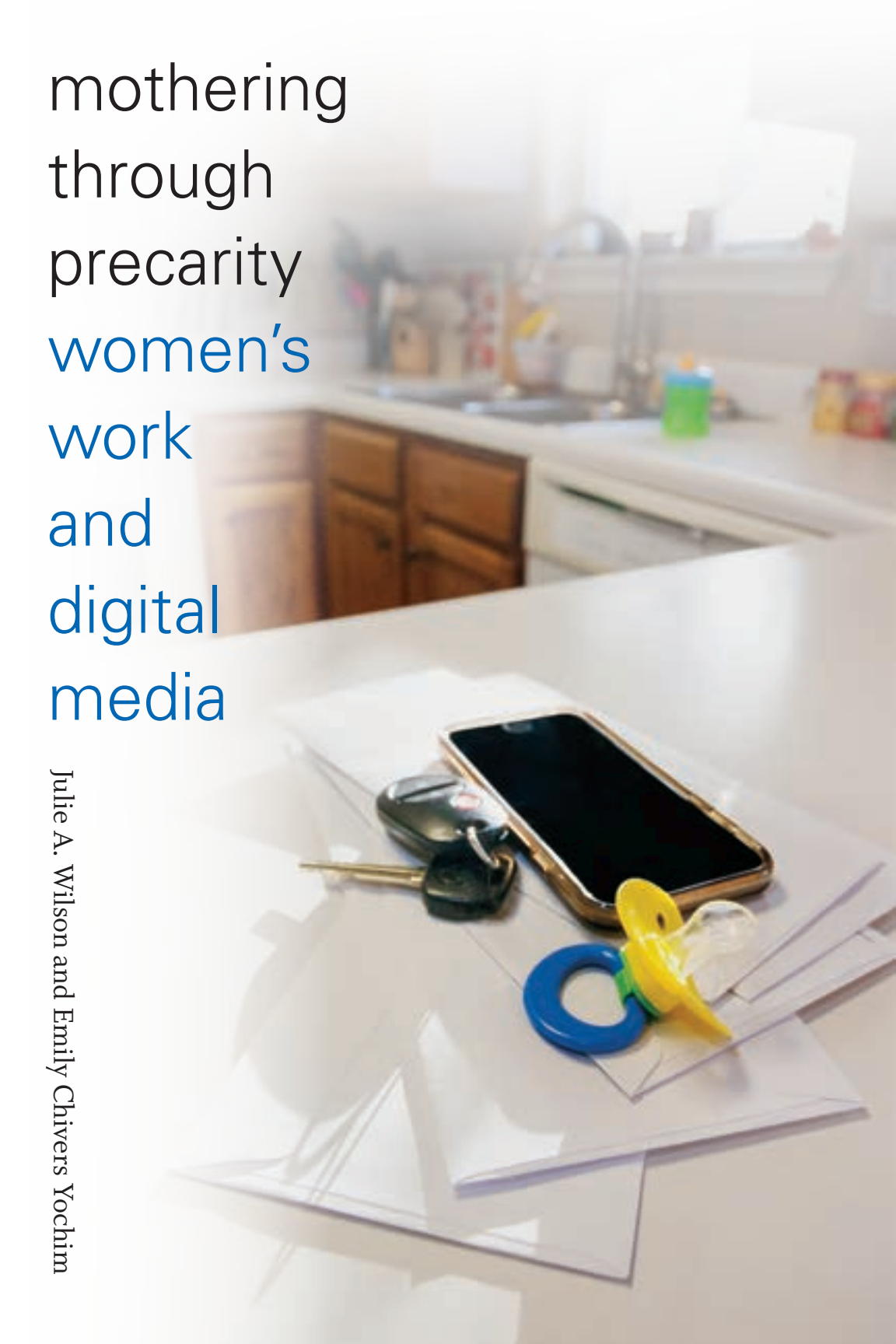

Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim

MOTHERING THROUGH PRECARITY

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Women's Work and Digital Media

JULIE A. WILSON AND

EMILY CHIVERS YOCHIM

Duke University Press Durham and London 2017

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper ∞
Text designed by Courtney Leigh Baker
Cover designed by Mindy Basinger Hill
Typeset in Whitman and Avenir by
Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Wilson, Julie A., [date] author. | Yochim, Emily Chivers, author.
Title: Mothering through precarity : women's work and digital media / Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016044713 (print)
LCCN 2016047429 (ebook)
ISBN 9780822363361 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN 9780822363477 (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN 9780822373193 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Motherhood—Economic aspects—United States. | Mothers—United States—Social conditions. | Nuclear families—Political aspects—United States. | Digital media—Social aspects.
Classification: LCC HQ759 .W527 2017 (print) | LCC HQ759 (ebook) | DDC 306.874/3—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016044713

Cover art: Photo by Douglas K. Hill.

For our moms,
Mary Chivers and Ann Wilson,
and the boys,
Elliot, Oliver, Isaac, Chris, and Joe

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A prominent theme that runs throughout *Mothering through Precarity* is the vital significance of the infrastructures we inhabit. Infrastructures are our conditions of possibility. They allow us to travel, connect, and get things done. Or not. This book would not have happened without many infrastructures.

First, our intellectual infrastructure: We are lucky to have a brilliant group of feminist media scholars who inspire, mentor, and support us, including Sarah Banet-Weiser, Elana Levine, Allison McCracken, Sujata Moorti, Carol Stabile, and Brenda Weber. Diane Negra championed this project in its infancy, and her unyielding faith that we were on to something important made all the difference. Much is owed too to Laurie Ouellette, who taught Julie to dwell in the pressure points of social life and whose own work and mentorship have played a huge role in the development of our thinking; to Bambi Haggins, who showed Emily that compassion and criticism can commingle; and to Susan Douglas, who guided Emily to appreciate popular culture's everyday pleasures while honing in on mundane gender wounds. This book has been immensely energized by Greg Seigworth, the Affect Theory Conference: Worldlings, Tensions, Futures (WTF), and everyone in Stream 11 ("Ordinary Affect and Everyday Life"): you provided so much inspiration in the very end when we needed it most. The final articulation is all you. Avi Santo, Jamie Henthorn, and Laura Portwood-Stacer, thank you for allowing us to share our work with your own students and peers. Sarah Crymble, Kamille Gentles-Peart, Hannah Hamad, and Alice Leppert, you are our buoys in this profession. Thank you for being there to listen, read, conspire, commiserate, and laugh.

Duke University Press has been a wonderful publishing infrastructure. So much is owed to Courtney Berger especially, who recognized early on

the tensions and potentialities embedded in our project. Thank you for asking the tough questions, providing thoughtful guidance, and finding the right reviewers to take our ideas to the next level. Sandra Korn was instrumental in pulling things together and willingly answered many questions about the nitty-gritty of putting the book in its final form. Thanks to our project editor, Lisa Bintrim, and our copyeditor for their sharp eyes and savvy advice. We also want to acknowledge here Joe Deville and Greg Seigworth (an early version of chapter 2 entitled "Mothering through Precarity: Becoming Mamapreneurial" appeared in their coedited special edition of *Cultural Studies*, "Everyday Debt and Credit"), as well as Elana Levine (some of our arguments were initially developed in our essay "Pinning Happiness: Affect, Social Media, and the Work of Mothering," which was published in Elana's *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*). Their editorial insights and guidance along the way were formative.

Allegheny College provides a supportive and nurturing institutional infrastructure. To our colleagues and students in the Department of Communication Arts and Theatre, we love you and thank you for being so supportive of our partnership, research, and the directions these take our teaching. Many students have contributed to this project over the years through participating in our classes, reading groups, and independent studies. A special thanks to our research assistants and thinking partners over the years: Megan Bart, Daniel Bauer, Erin Brockett, Larissa Card, Rachel DuChateau, Allison Nettnin, Rochelle Rogalski, and Brigit Stack. Funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Collaborative Undergraduate Research in the Humanities grant and the Allegheny College Dean's Fund for Student/Faculty Collaborative Research was instrumental in supporting these partnerships with students. Big thanks to Jan Mailliard for assiduous administrative support. We also are grateful to the Allegheny College Academic Support Committee for providing funds for our research and a space to share our early thinking, and to Linda Bills for inviting us to give the 20th Annual Pelletier Faculty Lecture. And, of course, we are forever indebted to our friends across campus who have supported us unconditionally throughout this grueling process: you know who you are.

And then there are our families, nuclear and extended, chosen and kin. The late John Wilson and Bud Tompkins would have been proud to see this book in print, and we wish they were still here. BeJay Gronauer, Patricia Langreck, Eleanor McGough, Kathie Smith, Deborah Tompkins, and Cathy

Wilson, you have been loud cheerleaders in Julie's life, providing much needed fuel and support, especially in hard times. Julie's sisters, Dana and Katie Wilson, are forces of nature in their own special ways; their energy and brilliance animate Julie's life—so much of this is for them.

Jennie Lindenberger, Amber Hotchkiss, Kelly Burke, and Asha Graeb have offered gentle and steady care to the Yochim boys. Nancy Kohler has been a lifelong inspiration, and Nicole Krystoff and Bethany Lewis are Emily's abiding allies, wise and funny chosen sisters. Emily's brothers, John and Tim Chivers, are steadfast in their love and wit, and her late brother Colin Chivers still galvanizes her. Emily's smart and tenacious dad, David Chivers, inspires with his enthusiasm. Finally, Nancy and John Yochim and the entire Yochim crew: your easy love is a soft landing.

To our moms, Ann Wilson and Mary Chivers, our bedrocks, our backbones. Ann, you are always there, watching from a distance or showing up to support us. You will never know just how much your unyielding pride and belief in Julie undergirds our work. Mary, we are ever grateful for your kindness and grace. You generously stepped in when we needed to retreat into our writing, and your abundant help with childcare—on regular Tuesdays, during conference travel with the babies, and all the times in between—has been instrumental to this book's completion. Thank you both for listening to us and caring for us as only mamas can.

To Elliot Yochim, Oliver Yochim, and Isaac Yochim, you have filled your mama up with joy and wonder, and your spirits anchor this book. Your gentle hearts and romping energies provided a constant reminder of what is at stake and why we write.

Our husbands have weathered this book right along with us. Joe Tompkins, thank you for, with "perverse pleasure," editing every single word, and for stepping in and caring for Julie when she couldn't care for herself. We are grateful (most of the time) for your loving cynicism. Chris Yochim, thank you for infusing our lives with humor and loyalty, and for so attentively nurturing Emily's domestic scene. You give the little Yochims a secure footing and a sure sense of belonging. To both of you: your love for each of us, and your unyielding support of our own partnership, is the greatest infrastructure of all.

Finally, this book would not be possible if it weren't for the mothers who shared their lives with us. Thank you for opening up and being vulnerable, so we could clearly see your own infrastructures. We have really tried to do them justice.

INTRODUCTION

THE DIGITAL MUNDANE

Mothering, Media, and Precarity

CARLY

"It's been brutal," Carly told us when we met her at a neighborhood barbecue joint to talk about her everyday life as a mother of three girls.[1] Friendly and pragmatic, Carly ordered a salad and beer and chatted with us for over two hours, laughing easily as she detailed the day-to-day frustrations of parenthood and candidly describing her family's financial troubles. In just three short years, this thirty-four-year-old had married her husband, become a stepmother, had two daughters of her own, abandoned her "dream career," found (and lost) a job as a marketer, weathered her husband's two layoffs, and taken on three young babysitting charges to make ends meet. In the meantime, Carly's father, with whom she used to talk for an hour daily, had passed away suddenly, and her mother had suffered a small stroke.

Carly's evening out with us was a temporary break from her normal day of caretaking and, more broadly, from a life shaped by seemingly impossible

options that have left her making weighty decisions in order to hold her family together. Indeed, Carly's adult life had been a complicated path—through corporate buyouts, insufficient maternity leaves, and touch-and-go childcare arrangements—to stay-at-home, work-at-home motherhood. Through it all, Carly turned to her online networks for parenting tips and emotional support, seeking advice about childhood illnesses and posting family pictures to Facebook to celebrate her good days with the girls.

Carly's life as a mother, marked by grave decisions and mundane engagements with digital media, is not unique. Over the course of a year, we interviewed and spent time with twenty-nine mothers, all of whom were trying to be "good moms" in a highly mediated and deeply insecure milieu. Many were scared and anxious; some embodied a hopeful confidence; all inhabited a sea of intensity and weight, as they felt responsible for bringing certainty to their family lives in deeply uncertain times. We heard stories about sudden job losses, health scares, and taxing struggles to balance care of self with care of family. We also heard stories about the pedestrian affordances associated with digital media, from the big savings available through online couponing to the domestic inspirations of Pinterest boards. *Mothering through Precarity* explores these everyday entanglements of digital media and women's work, showing the myriad ways mothers come to absorb the punishing tides of advanced neoliberalism at the level of everyday life.

Carly was one of the first mothers we interviewed. During our time together, we found Carly to be a loving, no-nonsense mother who thinks carefully about how to raise strong and respectful young women. She was also openly emotional, crying unselfconsciously when she talked about the insecurities and fears endemic to contemporary motherhood. Like many of the women we spoke with, Carly had not always imagined becoming a mother. In college she became passionate about radio and threw herself into training for a career in the field. She landed a job at a local radio station in her Rust Belt hometown and eventually became the assistant program director, "which was pretty much running the station"; she worked eighty- to ninety-hour weeks producing the morning show, logging programs, and making public appearances on weekends—all for very little pay. "I would work from three thirty a.m. to eleven at night," she told us. "Work. Work. Work. Work." On Carly's rare days off, her stepdaughter, Maddie, offered an early introduction to parenting. When she met Maddie at age two, Carly

took to her immediately, and she relished her part-time parenting role, enjoying child-centered time at the zoo as well as child-free time at the bar. Eventually, Carly and her husband decided to have more children—a decision she recalls "jok[ing] about for years" before arriving at a "point where I didn't want to joke about it anymore." She didn't seem to regard this decision with reverence, though, telling us, "We all know there's no right time to have kids." In short order, Carly had daughter Amanda and then, to her absolute shock, became pregnant with daughter Rory when Amanda was just five months old.

Though Carly had intended to take a twelve-week maternity leave after having Amanda, her radio station was undergoing a major change and asked her to return after just six weeks. Carly and her husband slogged through this grueling schedule for a while, with Carly sleeping in her daughter's room—getting up every few hours to make sure she was breathing and to breast-feed—and then turning on the baby monitor for her husband before leaving for work early in the morning. Carly's husband took Amanda to the sitter, and Carly pumped breast milk in the conference room at work, enduring male coworkers' teasing—"Oh! The creamer's here!" She laughs about this ribbing now, saying, "I was in mom mode even, you know, at work. I'm like, 'I gotta take care of my kid. I've gotta pump. I've gotta do this!' "

Becoming pregnant with Rory right after Amanda—and while Carly was in the throes of a taxing job and early motherhood—was overwhelming:

> I was really beyond belief with her. Scared out of my mind that I was going to have a one-year-old and a newborn and yelling, "How on earth am I going to do this and a career and a husband and a stepdaughter?" And I was very overwhelmed with her. And I felt horrible. It wasn't that I didn't want her, but I did just feel horrible because everything was turning in my mind going, "I don't know if I can do this." So if there really wasn't a right time for me to have a kid, in my mind it was when I was pregnant with Rory. It just completely threw me for a loop. And that's when I had to start analyzing, OK, "You're going to work at four a.m. Let's get a nine-to-five job." So I left a career that I love. I left a career that I loved and dreamed about for my family.

With her husband in and out of work, Carly eventually landed a less exciting job at a local company that better accommodated the rhythms and

demands of family, only to lose that job two years later thanks to a corporate buyout.

Needless to say, these early years of mothering were marked by intense uncertainty—fear that neither Carly nor her husband would find steady work, that managing work and childcare would be impossible, that things would fall apart. Of course, motherhood is always already a high-stakes and deeply precarious scene: giving birth, learning to care for little ones, worrying about children's safety, nurturing their potential.[2] Thanks to a deeply entrenched gendered division of labor and durable ideologies of "good" mothering, women still tend to assume personal responsibility for these precarious scenes, despite evolving gender norms and necessities around parenting and work.[3] Moreover, as Carly's rickety life suggests, neoliberalism introduces additional volatilities to nuclear family life that mothers also feel compelled to accept responsibility for and work to alleviate. In other words, today what is deeply precarious for Carly—and the purview of her women's work—is the viability of the family itself. Of course, liberal capitalism has always assaulted the viability of family for poor and dispossessed populations, especially for African Americans in the United States; however, neoliberalism is generalizing economic insecurity and familial destabilization across social strata, making precarity a more broadly, though still unevenly, shared feature of motherhood.

For example, when her family was on the ropes, Carly took it on herself to steer her family ship to steadier waters. As Carly surrendered her own dreams to focus on those she harbored for the family, the domestic sphere became a defensive, elastic space where she absorbed everyday shocks by constantly adjusting her aspirations, affects, and labors as a woman. In the face of unstable employment, she stayed optimistic, determined to do whatever she could to stabilize her shaky family scene. So when a friend posted on Facebook that he was in desperate need of a sitter owing to health crises within his own family, Carly saw an opportunity: "I told my husband, 'Well, if I'm going to stay home with the kids anyway, here's a chance to make a little something.' I don't break the bank by any means, babysitting. I mean, because they are old friends. And I don't charge them for days they're not there or if they're late, and I don't, you know, I provide food and all that stuff. . . . I'm bringing in something from it, but they're all just friends."

Carly has since taken on two other babysitting charges. She begins her workday at a quarter to seven—rolling out of bed every morning at six thirty to throw on sweatpants before the first child arrives—and does not finish

until seven in the evening. Her days now follow a predictable routine, packed with affordable outings with the kids to the zoo, the park, and the children's museum, and she is careful to build in time for herself, using the kids' nap times to exercise on the treadmill while she watches her soap, *Days of Our Lives,* which she digitally video-records daily. Carly is also online often—sharing funny family moments on Facebook in hopes of giving her friends and relatives a good laugh or looking for answers to health questions, which she readily admits has made her "a beast of a hypochondriac."

We begin with Carly because she exemplifies, in so many ways, what we learned about mothering through precarity. As decades of neoliberalism unravel the social protections that have historically propped up white nuclear family life, mothers like Carly feel they must work more and more to merely "hold on" to family.[4] Like Carly, other mothers we spoke with had, in their own ways, become flexible and resilient, quick to adjust expectations, defer their dreams, and retool their labors for the well-being and security of their families. Crucially, these efforts are realized within the banal spaces of digital media culture: online environments consisting of local Facebook groups, couponing sites, mommy blogs, health and parenting sites, photo apps, casual games, and so on. Mothers' precarious lives are inseparable from what we call *the digital mundane*.

IN SEARCH OF MOTHERS' VOICES

We began this research in search of mothers' voices. When we spoke to Carly and other women, we were simply eager to hear their own stories about life as women in the recessionary Rust Belt, which has long stood in stark contrast to the cosmopolitan, postfeminist mise-en-scène of so much media and consumer culture. We wanted to hear about their everyday joys and challenges, their hopes and dreams, and the ways media facilitated, shaped, and intersected with their gendered lives and labors. Both our scholarly and personal interests led to this research. Emily, a feminist media ethnographer and mother of three young boys, spent her first year of motherhood up countless nights with a colicky baby and immersed in digital mommy culture; accordingly, she was eager to explore mothers' work and mothering communities online and off. Julie, while happily child free, had done previous research on women's work, neoliberalism, and digital media and was invested in examining how gendered labor was taking shape on the ground in our respective postindustrial hometowns.[5]

Inspired by previous feminist audience studies, early on we adopted what Ien Ang calls a "radical contextualist perspective," which refuses to separate media culture from "the intersubjective networks" and "concrete contextual settings" of everyday life.[6] Consequently, we set out to tell a story about how media are interwoven into domestic scenes, giving sense to daily rituals and inciting particular modes of engaging with the family and the self. It was a story that would begin (or end) not with specific media texts, genres, or practices but rather with the situated stories and messy lifeworlds of women like Carly.

Most of the mothers in this study hail from two communities. The first is Julie's hometown of Ryeland. The county seat in a staunchly Republican area of northwestern Pennsylvania, Ryeland is characterized by rolling cornfields and small dairy farms. Home to 13,000 people—27.8 percent of whom live below the poverty line (a percentage far above the county's and the nation's average of 15 percent) and 5 percent of whom are black (compared with the county's 1.9 percent)—Ryeland is an oft-maligned small town that fosters deep loyalties among its citizens. Once prosperous—local lore suggests the town saw zero unemployment during the Great Depression—Ryeland now offers dilapidated Victorian homes ripe for renovation and restored Craftsman bungalows near a private liberal arts college that sits on top of a hill above the town. The downtown struggles to keep businesses, while empty storefronts speckle the streets. A multiplex cinema located just outside the town's borders screens the latest blockbusters, and an active community theater supplements the sparse cultural offerings of the local college. The town's manufacturing sector is legendary, though it now struggles under the pressures of globalization. The hospital and the college are the leading employers in a postindustrial, service-driven, knowledge-based economy. Ryeland is also a town where ideologies collide: Mennonite families sell homegrown jam to relocated professionals, longtime residents work alongside college students at underfunded local service organizations, and Christian conservatives exercise together with bohemian mothers at the YMCA.

The second community is the nearby Hugo region, a sprawling metro-suburban space that is a thirty-minute car ride north of Ryeland. This is where Emily lives with her husband and three boys, in close proximity to their large extended family. Home to 100,000—75 percent white, 19.7 percent black, and 6.9 percent Hispanic—the decaying, postindustrial city swings liberal owing to the working-class union Democrats who largely

FIGURE 1.1 Downtown Ryeland.

populate it. As with Ryeland, Hugo's poverty rate approaches 30 percent (while the broader county's rate is 18 percent), as it too is transitioning toward a service- and tourism-based economy. While some of the women in this project come from the city of Hugo, others hail from its surrounding suburbs, a sprawling community (with a population of 50,000) that circles the city with a wide range of single-family homes, soccer fields, and chain restaurants. Downtown Hugo comprises seventy blocks filled with small high rises, abandoned buildings previously devoted to heavy industry, and cheap local bars and eateries. The city's waterfront has recently been redeveloped for tourism, and festivals are held almost every week during the summer. Winters are hard, with heavy snowfall and long, gray days. Residents pride themselves on their winter driving skills, general hardiness, and summertime cheer. Down-to-earth and a bit gritty, this area is also home to vibrant underground music scenes and close-knit artist communities.

In the spring of 2012, we hung up flyers at local community colleges, preschools, and grocery stores inviting "mothers of young children" to talk with us about their experiences as mothers. We asked acquaintances and

FIGURE 1.2. Suburban working-class neighborhood in Hugo.

the mothers we interviewed for referrals, and we also reached out to several mommy bloggers from Emily's networks.[7] Most of the women who volunteered to speak to us were in the throes of mothering babies and toddlers, though some had school-age children. Most were white, but one was African American and another identified as multiracial. While some mothers we interviewed enjoyed economic security, many were working class or precariously middle class. Two women were working-poor. Most were married, though relationships were sometimes strained; others were in committed relationships. All of the women were heteronormative in their orientation toward family, and all of them lived in some version of the nuclear family, individualized units bound together by economic and caregiving needs.

In interview sessions that ranged from one to three hours, we sat with mothers in bars, coffee shops, our offices, and their own homes, and we talked about life with young children. Our interviews began by asking them to introduce us to their families and continued with questions about the rhythms of daily life ("Tell us about a typical day, from morning till night"). Children sometimes skittered in and out of our conversations as

mothers told us about what made them feel like "good mothers" and what made them feel "not so good." They described their fears and hopes for their children and listed, often in dramatic detail, the labors they perform on a weekly basis. Only after we had a rich sense of their lives did we ask about media: what websites they frequented, what television shows they watched, how much they watched or browsed, and why they made these choices. In this way, *Mothering through Precarity* is aligned with what Elizabeth Bird calls "generation three" media ethnographies, which follow media through everyday lives.[8] Indeed, our conversations ranged far and wide—exploring the virtues of streaming media while cleaning the house, husbands' ability to relax in front of the television and mothers' inability to watch without multitasking, and fears about sacrificing time with their children to devote more time to work or Facebook.

Emily also engaged in extensive participant observation in a local Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) group. A popular international Christian network of mothering communities, MOPS supports mothers of young children through the muck of parenting. From September 2011 to June 2012, Emily met regularly with this group, participating in twice-monthly meetings for two hours at a time with fifty women at a large church; she also attended multiple informal playgroups with about six members at their homes and local playgrounds, and hosted a small baby shower for one of the members. Emily also participated in several organized events, including a holiday cookie exchange and a MOPS fund-raiser—a rummage sale at a local church, where participants rented table space so that they could sell their own wares. At these large-group meetings, Emily put her young children in childcare with the other members' children and listened to speakers, watched demonstrations, made crafts, and participated in guided discussions about contemporary parenting.

The MOPS group facilitated conversations that cut to the heart of women's dreams and fears for their families. The two-hour meetings were highly structured: after the large group listened to a speaker, table leaders facilitated small-group discussions centered on caring for children and families. In less structured activities outside the monthly MOPS meetings, Emily came to know these mothers more fully as they spent a considerable amount of time together watching the children play and discussing children's behavior and personalities. This participant observation offered a glimpse into the daily conversations of a community of mothers, bringing to life some of the issues discussed in the interviews and formal meetings.

Five of the women we interviewed were members of Emily's MOPS group, and two interviewees were members of a different MOPS group in the region.

BEYOND THE "MOMMY WARS"

It is important to understand that, from the beginning, we conceived this research as a distinctly feminist political intervention rooted in mothers' voices. As Nick Couldry argues, critical work grounded in voice is ever more pressing in the context of neoliberalism, in which the marketization of all of life increasingly deems "ordinary" voices worthless. Couldry explains:

> Voice does more than value particular voices or acts of speaking; it values all human beings' ability to give an account of themselves; it values my and your status as "narratable" selves. . . . Articulating voice—as an inescapable aspect of human experience—challenges the neoliberal logic that runs together economic, social, political, and cultural domains, and describes them as manifestations of market processes. It challenges the silences and gaps that arise when decisions on one scale—market functioning—seem naturally to "trump" the potential exercise of voice on other scales. It challenges any form of organization that ignores voice, and rejects, as a starting-point, apparent forms of voice . . . which offer only the opportunity to compete as a commodity.[9]

Media studies becomes complicit with neoliberalism's suppression of voice to the extent that it tends to privilege the commodified voices of "market functioning": that is, the producers, representations, audiences, fans, and users considered most valuable to the media industries. For example, both media-industry and audience studies tend to narrow the focus to popular sites of "convergence culture" and thus often elevate the practices and tastes of producers and fans (and sometimes academics themselves).[10] As a result, the persistent and banal inequalities that make up everyday life for media users like Carly tend to take a backseat to the new horizons of industrial cultural production. In losing sight of "nonmedia people," that is, those constituencies who aren't usually regarded as primary media users, media studies risks extending the economization of our social world by rendering inaudible the voices that are not so readily accounted for within the increasingly corporatized, fast-paced landscapes of neoliberal academia.[11]

We set out to give voice to mothers in our own communities, to listen to their stories of mothering, media, and everyday survival. The mothers we spoke with do not constitute an audience per se, much less a cohort of fans; their voices do not emerge from urban centers, and they do not necessarily share the desires, beliefs, values, and investments of popular cultural intermediaries, much less feminists like ourselves.[12] But by listening to these voices, we hoped to illuminate the "silences and gaps" of everyday gendered life—their situated, concrete contributions to the social and political imagination. Indeed, while the mothers we interviewed certainly do not speak for *all* mothers, taken together their voices provide a snapshot of everyday life for some women.

We also hoped that our approach might disrupt the so-called mommy wars, a prominent gender discourse that pits mothers against one another. In 1990 *Newsweek* popularized the term in an article titled "Mommy vs. Mommy," effectively marking the difference between working and stay-at-home moms as "a feud . . . that defines an era." Since then, contemporary media culture has capitalized on this distinction—purportedly based on personal choices women make about work, family, lifestyle, and childrearing. While these "wars" were supposedly fought over mothers' orientations toward paid work, they now regularly get referenced in relation to mothers' decisions about everything from medical care to nutrition to sleep. At the same time, calls to end the mommy wars abound.[13]

But it is important to see that the mommy wars are themselves symptomatic of broader neoliberal developments that, as our research shows, are not easy to shake. As Nikolas Rose argues, "wars of subjectivity" emerge when the lifestyles, communities, values, and beliefs of individuals come to figure as the primary medium of governmentality.[14] As public conceptions of citizenship premised on democratic participation are replaced with privatized models of personal choice, the gendered practice of lifestyle cultivation—in the sense of "good mothering"—becomes an increasingly politicized affair. Accordingly, we are concerned that prominent ideological critiques of media and motherhood within our own field inadvertently contribute to the mommy-war mentality. For example, critiques of the "new momism" tend to follow mainstream media discourse in drawing lines of distinction between women based on personal choices, investments, cultural norms, and political orientations.[15] By contrast, we wanted to undercut this approach by "decentering" dominant media culture—particularly its obsession with the mommy wars—and instead set out to hear from

mothers themselves about their daily rituals and routines, their everyday engagements with media.[16]

These commitments guided both our experiences with mothers and our collaborative research process. As we entered encounters with mothers, we tried to unsettle the inherent power relationships between researchers and subjects. Emily's "insider" status as a mother of three certainly helped to generate intimacy and trust on many occasions. Indeed, Emily, too, wrestles with how to make family "work," and while she is critical of predominant mothering media, she takes enormous pleasure in throwing elaborate birthday parties for her boys and taking on ambitious do-it-yourself home projects. Julie, on the other hand, might be considered a sympathetic "outsider" looking in who places herself in solidarity with mothers. While several of our colleagues suggested that Julie might not fully understand mothers' lives—that her outsider status might prevent her from writing an honest and thoughtful account—our collaboration easily crossed these lifestyle boundaries; through constant communication we cycled in and out of mothers' lives and through the theories that helped us capture and articulate their forms and sensibilities. Still, we found ourselves routinely surprised by how readily many of the women we interviewed—regardless of class status, lifestyle, or cultural sensibility—opened up to both of us. Our conversations were often profoundly emotional: sometimes mothers cried, and many shared intimate, at times painful, details of their lives. By the end we had a stark sense that, for most, mothering is a fraught affair defined by a matrix of affective intensities—from the immense love they harbor for their children to the overwhelming anxieties that animate their lives.

Ultimately, our commitments carried a specific "burden of authorship" that animated our writing: maintaining solidarity with the mothers and giving voice to their stories, while holding on to our own critical, political, and feminist sensibilities. Indeed, our greatest challenge was situating mothers' voices in ways that would both honor their singularity and highlight our own insights. Throughout our research, we strove to balance sympathy toward mothers' lives with an unsentimental view of the larger structures that impinge on them, in hopes of writing a story that might intimate new modes of collectivity and political horizons.

AFFECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURES

Our work was guided, first and foremost, by what Melissa Gregg calls "a desire for the mundane." In her article "A Mundane Voice," on Meaghan Morris's use of anecdotes and colloquial address, Gregg argues that Morris was driven not by a desire for master narratives but rather by a feminist orientation, specifically, "by an urge to hear how cultural changes land in the context of people's everyday."[17] According to Gregg, Morris's work hones in on what Brian Massumi calls the "this-ness": "an unreproducible being-only-itself," enacting what Morris herself calls a mode of "historical analysis attuned both to socio-economic contexts and to the individuating local intensities." Being attuned to the mundane means attending to the local affective intensities that give sense and shape to people's lives, for these local intensities are themselves singular examples of "how the world can be said to be working."[18] For Gregg, Morris's mundane is politically significant for its humility and the "honesty and concreteness" it brings to intellectual work. The mundane demands letting go of "preferred interpretative models" in order to see emergent forms and performances and the horizons for collective life they figure.[19]

This "desire for the mundane" led us to see mothers' everyday lives as compositions: more specifically, as swirling amalgamations of "ordinary affects." Kathleen Stewart describes ordinary affects as "the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They're things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *some*thing. . . . They give circuits and flows the forms of a life."[20]

Ordinary affects happen in the mundane flows of everyday lives; they are "a kind of contact zone" where events, politics, strategies for living, and "flows of power" meet and are enacted.[21] As such, they help us to see how big forces fold into minute lifeworlds in multiple, shifting, and highly contingent ways, and how these might prime people to order and experience their lives. As Stewart suggests, "structure is prismatic. It takes place as singular events saturated with everyday violence. . . . Politics is not reducible to a communal consciousness or a neatly conceptualized ideology

but takes place as intensities of all kinds and in various registers. Agency is not the clear and intentional act of a subject but an energetics."[22] For both Gregg and Stewart, the potential for new worlds is embedded within the ordinary affective movements of everyday life. Agency registers in emergent and situated senses of what it might be possible to do, be, and become in a particular time and place, in the "forms of living" that "are now being composed and suffered."[23]

Mothering through Precarity hones in on mothers' ordinary affective lives and, more specifically, the affective infrastructures that undergird their labors and give their lives sense, texture, and form. Affective infrastructures are akin to "structures of feeling," Raymond Williams's influential, though undertheorized concept that seeks to register the shared social sensibilities of possibility that are engendered by discourses of all sorts but are not reducible to their significations.[24] As Lawrence Grossberg explains, structures of feeling inhabit the "gap between what can be rendered meaningful and knowable and what is nevertheless livable."[25] While not reducible to discourse, ordinary affects are structured—readily captured and made to circulate. They materialize and surge within particular social and historical circuits. Affective infrastructures thus direct attention to the governed life of ordinary affects by locating the affects that make up mothers' everydays within the specific infrastructures that animate, channel, direct, and redirect them. As Lauren Berlant puts it, "one's infrastructures are one's obligation to show up to life a certain way."[26] They help us to understand how mothers' days get organized and prioritized, navigated and survived—in other words, why mothers "show up" for family "a certain way" in this time and place.

Ultimately, this focus on affective infrastructures reveals the quiet and everyday brutalities of advanced neoliberalism for the women we interviewed. We use the term *advanced neoliberalism* loosely to characterize the atmosphere in the postindustrial Rust Belt. Here the exuberant entrepreneurial freedoms of the postwelfare state have long since given way to the harsh demands of austerity. The proactive, empowered self is thus a resilient subject who must cultivate capacities to cope with the shriveling resources and broken promises that neoliberalism brings to social life. Communities are often so depleted—affectively, culturally, politically, and economically—that there's little left to do except adapt, adjust, and, as Ryeland's city manager put it, "try to keep things going." Meanwhile, amid ongoing sprawl, Hugo's population just recently officially dipped below

100,000, which means the city will no longer qualify for much-needed federal grants.

Grounded in the voices of women in these places at this time, *Mothering through Precarity* opens up critical insights into mother's lives and the ways digital media come to animate, shape, and sometimes jeopardize them. Focusing on mothers' affective infrastructures allows us to see how women keep moving through daily hardships while remaining optimistic about their family's prospects, even as their lives get more and more uncertain and unmanageable. By tracing the myriad ways mothers weather advanced neoliberalism at the level of everyday media life, we capture the affective compositionality of mothering through precarity.

THE DIGITAL MUNDANE

Our "desire for the mundane" led us to the digital mundane, that is, to the banal entanglements of media and everyday life through which mothers like Carly strive to stabilize their families. The digital mundane was something we discovered late in our research. After completing the interviews, we found ourselves vexed and uncertain about how to write a book about mothering *and* media. While mothers spilled vivid stories about their daily trials and tribulations, their accounts of media were comparatively dull and sometimes nonexistent. Carly was actually one of the few mothers who seemed eager to talk about television. While many mothers mentioned TV, it often figured as background noise, something they had on while doing other things like checking e-mail or visiting Facebook. Others considered TV primarily in relation to their children or husbands, but when it came to *their* lives, they often appeared surprisingly indifferent. This is not to say that they didn't watch TV, but that television wasn't something they seemed to want to talk about.[27]

Mothers did, however, have more to say about their engagements with digital media, but even these stories were few and far between, and often lacking in specificity and richness. We heard some stories about particular websites, like BabyCenter, an online corporate-run community for expecting or new mothers, and social media platforms, like Pinterest. But, by and large, mothers didn't focus on discrete digital texts, sites, platforms, or practices. They tended to discuss their digital lives broadly as affective experiences, explaining what it *feels* like to be perusing message boards or shopping online.

Ironically, mothers' mundane voices spoke to the "silences and gaps" of the digital mundane. Here, media don't necessarily stand out as particularly significant—as objects worth talking about on their own—but figure as something indistinguishable from the movements of everyday life. As mothers move through their quotidian routines, dipping into social media for quick moments of adult interaction, digital culture becomes a vital, though taken-for-granted, foundation for their days. Whether mothers are scrolling through Facebook for links that promise something (fear, happiness, entertainment), organizing children for post-able snapshots, or Googling health conditions or child-friendly crafts, digital media are seamlessly woven into the fabric of family and women's work, though these engagements might be hard to voice and articulate.

Indeed, as new technologies are embedded in everyday life in increasingly banal ways, *the mundane itself is always already digital*. Readily available and always present, digital media constantly hum in the background. They stand at the ready as naturalized means for social interaction, information gathering, and entertainment, infusing ordinary joys and challenges with the potentialities of digital affordances. The digital mundane circulates a vast array of tools for "good" living, helping to make hard lives feel livable and sometimes even happy, while also mirroring and multiplying the threats of advanced neoliberalism.

For mothers, the digital mundane figures as a highly gendered atmosphere. The churning updates of Facebook feeds; the endless flows of recipes, coupons, and warnings; and the unrelenting streams of maternal advice all work to constitute the digital mundane as a *mamasphere* that is constantly percolating with information, inspiration, and opportunity for mothers. The mamasphere is a network of networks, composed of millions of "mommy blogs," each offering personal reflections on the experience of mothering; corporate websites like BabyCenter that peddle parenting products and advice and promise community through forums and chat rooms; feminized social media platforms that specialize in domestic inspiration, from Pinterest to cooking and couponing sites; and mothering communities like Momastery, where struggling moms find vital forms of emotional and material support.

The mamasphere also intersects with and thrives on broader popular networks, like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as mothers post and pass around the latest family photo, an inspirational meme, a birthday-party idea, or a piece of parenting news. Overall, the mamasphere is a contra-

dictory web of advice, friendship, information, and entertainment, fueled by highly organized and interactive data-mining machines but also by the situated experiences of mothers. Indeed, the mamasphere comes to be only via the cooperation and contributions of mothers, who produce and inhabit its always-on, churning content as they navigate the complexities of contemporary motherhood.

For mothers, the mamasphere beckons with what Brian Massumi calls the "event-potential" of affect.[28] Indeed, digital networks are affective networks.[29] While ideologies teem online, it is affect that binds network cultures. As Jodi Dean puts it:

> Blogs, social networks, Twitter, YouTube: they produce and circulate affect as a binding technique. Affect . . . is what accrues from reflexive communication, from communication for its own sake, from the endless circular movement of commenting, adding notes and links, bringing in new friends and followers, layering and interconnecting myriad communications platforms and devices. Every little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in.[30]

Mothers are thus drawn to online environments by the "tiny affective nuggets" that circulate and accrue in the mamasphere; their encounters promise ongoing modulation and attunement to precarious family scenes. These affective nuggets—a happy family photo, a shared link to a time line, a much-needed "like"—cannot, therefore, be separated from the ordinary affects that make up everyday life. They are part and parcel of the affective compositionality of mothers' lives, moving in and out, pushing and pulling, terrifying and inspiring. They give life form and sense. Affective networks may even engender what Zizi Papacharissi calls "affective publics": "networked structures of feeling" that may "drive powerful disruption, help accumulate intensity and tension, or simply sustain infinite loops of activity and inactivity."[31] Simply put, the digital mundane is the affective machinery of everyday life. It is where sensibilities are shaped, worked on, intensified, assuaged, and attenuated, where worlds are simultaneously opened up and shut down.

On one hand, the affective networks of the mamasphere are stable, predictable, and profoundly comforting, as algorithms seem to know mothers

so well. Indeed, the mamasphere is highly customized to their everyday lives and targets them accordingly, creating a deeply gendered and racialized "digital enclosure" that is built on the same social and economic inequalities that make up everyday life.[32] As Ulises Ali Mejias argues, networks are nodocentric: "Nodocentrism means that while networks are extremely efficient at establishing links between nodes, they embody a bias against knowledge of—and engagement with—anything that is not a node in the same network. Only nodes can be mapped, explained, or accounted for. . . . [N]odocentrism constructs a social reality in which nodes can only see other nodes. It is an epistemology based on the exclusive reality of the node. It privileges nodes while discriminating against what is not a node—the invisible, the Other."[33] Mothers circulate through mothering nodes along paths paved and paid for by multinational corporations, data firms, and marketers.[34] These nodes are designed to compel and channel mothers' participation as corporate interests constantly look to optimize online sociality and the affect that fuels communicative capitalism. "Participation is thus both a form of violence and a form of pleasure," Mejias insists. "More than a desire, participation is an urge, a form of coercion imposed by the system. This logic is internalized, rationalized, and naturalized. Participation in the network is a template for being social, for belonging."[35] Put a bit differently, through mothers' own highly structured participation, the mamasphere engenders deeply quotidian and practically invisible affective communities premised on already-existing hierarchies of class, race, gender, and sexuality.

On the other hand, the mamasphere is erratic and mercurial, intimately bound up in the mundane movements of everyday lives. As network theorist Tiziana Terranova writes, "beneath the level of desktop applications such as browsers and email, the space of the internetwork is continuously although unevenly agitated, constrained and transformed by the movement of packets. . . . This movement is the condition within which Internet culture operates and it constitutes an important interface with the world of locality. The relation between the local and the global, the territory and the network is thus that of fluctuation, of an increased or decreased, obstructed or relayed flow."[36] The mamasphere is both local and global: at once deeply responsive to, and contingent on, particular lives but also determined by the invisible protocols of the global network itself. Hence, affect circulates via the movement of packets—those seemingly inconsequential mobile bits of data that undergird and constitute the network's form. The movement

of packets is the humming atmosphere in which mundane localities constantly agitate, contract, and expand the global network. However, some movements end up punctuating mothers' lives: a simple comment may get posted, shared, or noticed, even accidentally, and temporarily fill life with feelings of joy, hope, inadequacy, or fear. In so many ways, life in the digital mundane is moody, spasmodic, uncontrollable.

Ultimately, approaching the affective networks of the digital mundane requires what Mark B. N. Hansen calls a "*radically environmental perspective*."[37] Earlier media systems were designed to tell and distribute human stories, and thus their primary modality of power was interpellation. Digital media systems are different. Driven by the invisible and unknowable workings of big data, their aim is to register the environmentality of the world itself. Their power stems from the system's ability to access a "domain of worldly sensibility," where one senses the potentiality of things while having no access to, or knowledge of, the system itself.[38] Subjectivity takes shape in the mundane entanglements of these unknowable systems; as Hansen puts it, "we can no longer conceive of ourselves as separate, quasi-autonomous subjects, facing off against distinct media objects; rather, we are ourselves composed as subjects through the operation of a host of multi-scalar processes."[39]

Following Hansen, the digital mundane requires seeing mothers' everyday lives as intertwined with the mamasphere's digital affective networks, which provide ubiquitous opportunities for encounters with the worldly sensibility of contemporary motherhood. As we show, the ever-beckoning potentiality of the mamasphere makes everyday family life livable in myriad ways, while also reinforcing the inequalities on which these lives are premised. Not surprisingly, the mothers in our study generally inhabit the mamasphere with deep ambivalence. While they certainly appreciate its participatory affordances, they are also unsettled by its frenetic movements, which tend to exacerbate the volatilities and hurts of daily life.

PRIVATIZING FAMILY HAPPINESS

In the following chapters, we explore how mothers live entangled with digital media, and how the mamasphere undergirds women's unrelenting efforts at holding together their families. For mothers, family feels precarious; it is up to them to absorb the shocks that threaten to tear it apart. In response to the generalized insecurities of advanced neoliberalism, mothers step up their affective labors, confronting the precarious status of the family

with intensified and expanded practices of women's work organized around privatizing happiness.

In *State of Insecurity*, Isabell Lorey distinguishes three dimensions of the precarious: precariousness, precarity, and precarization.[40] Precariousness is the shared condition of human and nonhuman life that emerges out of inherent interdependencies and vulnerabilities. Precarity, on the other hand, is a product of social, legal, and political orders that hierarchize shared precariousness, differentiating between those bodies that warrant security and protection and those that do not.[41] So while mothers share the precariousness of motherhood, their lived experiences as mothers are shaped according to differential distributions of risk and insecurity. Finally, precarization refers to a mode of biopolitical governmentality specific to the rise and advancement of the neoliberal state. While poor, dispossessed, and otherwise marginalized populations have long felt the punishing effects of precarity, neoliberalism governs *for and through* widespread insecurity, that is, through precarization. Lorey explains that "contrary to the old rule of a domination that demands obedience in exchange for protection, neoliberal governing proceeds primarily through social insecurity, through regulating the minimum of assurance while simultaneously increasing instability."[42] Thus, white middle-class families, once stabilized by social protections, become subject to precarity and, like Carly's, get swept up in neoliberalism's tumultuous tides. For example, Carly's father supported his family with a small business he inherited from his father. Carly thus grew up in a comfortable two-story home down the street from a country club in a suburb outside of Hugo with a well-regarded public school, and her parents put her through college. Despite these economic privileges, Carly and her husband, like so many of the mothers we spoke with, still struggle to stay afloat.

As we argue, ongoing precarization incites new gender sensibilities that impinge on and intensify women's work and their experiences of motherhood. As Lorey writes, "precarization means more than insecure jobs, more than the lack of security given by waged employment. By way of insecurity and danger it embraces the whole of existence, the body, modes of subjectivation. It is threat and coercion, even while it opens up new possibilities of living and working. Precarization means living with the unforeseeable, with contingency."[43] More than a material situation of economic insecurity, precarity is an everyday sense of threat, vulnerability, and uncertainty that must be confronted and managed in the contexts of everyday life. For

the mothers we spoke with, what is felt to be precarious is first and foremost the family itself, and so these women work eagerly and anxiously to securitize their familial scenes.

More specifically, as advanced neoliberalism unravels the social securities that historically have propped up nuclear family life, mothers come to organize their lives around *privatizing happiness*, assuming higher and higher degrees of material and emotional responsibility for their families' well-being and security. Sam Binkley argues that happiness is the "hinge" of neoliberalism: through taking on happiness as a personal, private enterprise, individuals come to accept responsibility for their lives and disembed themselves from the affective life of the welfare state.[44] Jennifer Silva calls the privatization of happiness a "mood economy" and documents how working-class adults develop new markers of adulthood and currencies of citizenship through emotional self-transformation.[45] In both of these accounts, the privatization of happiness is a process of affective realignment: to adjust to a world where nothing is, or should be, guaranteed, individuals cultivate their capacities for achieving highly individualized forms of happiness on their own through self-work.

We suggest, however, that, for mothers, privatizing happiness is a powerful gender orientation toward the work of mothering, whereby individual women assume responsibility for underwriting their family's "promise of happiness."[46] Since family as a predictable and stable path to the good life is no longer a given, mothers feel pressed to hone gender capacities to not only govern the home and raise children but also, at the same time, shore up the material and affective conditions of possibility for family itself. No longer able to rely on public institutions or inherited social and economic capital, mothers feel it is up to them to privatize happiness for their families on their own.

Indeed, while Carly's life as a work-at-home, stay-at-home mom was precipitated by exploitative maternity-leave policies and a corporate buyout, she largely came to terms with her situation by focusing on all of the new ways *she* can help her family.[47] As she does what she "needs to do" for the kids, the questions on her mind are not so much about whether she wants go to work or to stay home as about what she needs to do right now to keep her family safe and sound. Deeply concerned about Hugo's struggling school system, Carly decided to send her daughters to Catholic school. And, rather than harboring anger about leaving her dream career, Carly insists on her happiness, focusing on the benefits of her current situation.

For example, after both her daughters contracted swine flu, she told her husband, " 'I'm so thankful that I'm home because I don't have to take sick days or personal days or vacation days to be home and deal with this.' I'm not losing any money or any of my time because they're sick. I'm here with them, and I know what's going on and I can be here." For Carly, privatizing happiness is at once a material (sending her kids to private school) and affective ("I am thankful that I'm home") process that gives sense and shape to her work as a mother.

Women's work thus figures as a crucial linchpin of neoliberalism, as the continued erosion of public social infrastructures hinges on women like Carly and their efforts at privatizing happiness. In practice, then, advanced neoliberalism proceeds largely *through* women, as it is mothers' affective labors as the naturalized caregivers and keepers of the domestic realm that underwrite precarization and make it possible.[48] As Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues, because mothering is imagined to be bound tightly to the "reproductive function," it is "seen as natural, universal, and unchanging. . . . In this model, responsibility for mothering rests almost exclusively on one woman (the biological mother), for whom it constitutes the primary if not sole mission during the child's formative years."[49] Glenn's work emphasizes the diversity of mothering experiences and mothering roles, but it also highlights the enduring circulation of ideologies that pinpoint women as the "natural" caretakers of children and work to maintain long-standing gendered divisions of labor.

Thanks to these entrenched discourses, mothers are the ones who ultimately come to compensate for lost jobs, underfunded public schools, decimated state budgets, and the volatilities all these bring to family life, as mothers constantly retool and expand their women's work—taking on more and more social responsibility with less and less social support—in hopes of bringing some measure of stability to their shaky family scenes. Put a bit differently, mothers today are saddled not only with long-standing gender regimes of social reproduction but also with the precarious status of family itself. The demands of precarization pile onto mothers' already unequal and overburdened gendered lives, intensifying and expanding what is at stake in their practices of care. Privatizing happiness is thus frenzied, always impossible, ever more exploitative gender work, as, of course, mothers alone cannot actually guarantee their families' well-being in a global neoliberal economy fueled by growing insecurity.

Orienting their labors around the precarity of family and its ongoing incitements to privatize more and more happiness, mothers feel that they must work constantly, and on myriad fronts, just to keep the promise of family alive. Not surprisingly, then, as neoliberalism intensifies the high stakes and heartrending work of raising children, it also sharpens the banal and painful gender inequalities that continue to undergird life in the nuclear family for most women. For example, Carly and her husband have had to work out a number of issues connected to the constantly shifting terms of their home and work lives. While he imagines her luxuriating in sweatpants and simply playing with kids all day, she envies his days of adult conversations and scheduled lunch breaks. She explained, "I mean . . . he's starting to. But I think I do harbor some animosity at the 'You need to come home and unwind' or 'You just drove home [two hours], and you need two and a half hours to unwind.' No! We have work to do. Get up." Though Carly's husband suffered several layoffs, he never left the paid job market. Now that he's returned to full-time work, the couple struggles to negotiate mounting labors and their need for rest. Carly explained her frustrations further:

> I wish that he would step up more, I guess, to realize that I've been doing this all day, and he wants to come home and go on Facebook, or go down and watch a show, or read the paper or something. And I don't have time for, I don't have time to do that. . . . I don't want to say he doesn't understand, but he needs his—quote, unquote—"time to unwind." And I guess I have mine when the kids are napping. But when he gets home at 5 p.m. or 5:30 p.m. and I'm trying to get dinner on the table, and, you know, it's a bad night, and Amanda has homework, and I still have this kid here until 7:00 p.m. My mind is just blank. How do I keep up? And he just wants to veg. And I don't think it's fair sometimes.

Many of the mothers we spoke with described this gender scene. While Carly's husband, as well as most of the other husbands we heard about, seemed to expect downtime when they could disappear into television or online, mothers described turning to social media for very brief breaks in the interstices of care work and watching television only while multitasking. As we noted earlier, Carly catches up on TV while exercising during the kids' nap time. We heard many stories of this sort of husband privilege: men "veg out" while women feel compelled to keep working and working for

the family. As we show, they feel that it is up to them to prepare for and handle the fallout from inevitable disasters, to ward off and mitigate everyday threats that loom. As the assumed keepers of the domestic realm, they are the "designated worriers."[50]

No matter what, though, Carly is determined to stay focused on her family amid banal impossibilities and everyday gender hurts, so she organizes her energies around creating happy family moments that her children will remember. She explains, "You stop what you're doing for your kids. And you're there for them. You know, in the younger years, you aren't going to get them back. If they want to color, color with them. If they want to do a puzzle, do a puzzle. This is what they're going to remember, not that you bought them a new stuffed animal or bought them a new shirt or whatever. You know?" Aware that they are not in a position to keep up with the promises of consumer culture, Carly is certain that her investments of time and love are what ultimately matter most for her kids. In the summer of 2012, Carly documented her daily family activities in four Facebook photo albums titled "Promise of a Fun Summer." She captioned these albums, "I have made a promise to myself to make it a memorable summer for my little ones (without breaking the budget). Here is a pictorial of our summer!" Every day she posted at least one picture of her children doing something fun—these ranged from the extraordinary (e.g., visiting children's museums and amusement parks) to the mundane (e.g., eating popsicles outside, collecting pinecones). For Carly, Facebook provides a readily accessible platform for lifting her family into happiness amid the precarity that envelops her family. Through mundane digital encounters—snapping and sharing images of summer fun—Carly stabilizes her shaky family scene, coding the volatilities and uncertainties of everyday life as happy moments.

For Carly, a large part of privatizing happiness is about constantly tuning her ordinary affects to the precarity of family. Interestingly, Carly's favorite mothering model is *Roseanne*, which she DVRs and watches in the evenings or while working out:

> She's brutal, but that show is probably the most true-to-life parenting show I've ever seen. She had to deal with some crazy issues. I've had to deal with some crazy issues. And you're not a perfect parent. Nobody is. And anybody that thinks there is—you're going to mess up and your kids are going to mess up and you've just got to, OK. But see, I love Roseanne. I seriously do. I think that she's real. You

> know? If [my kids mess up], I feel disappointed in myself, and I think that's how Roseanne feels. Like, if they fail, she puts it on herself, she doesn't blame her kids. "What did I do wrong?"

For Carly, Roseanne is a hero, but not because of her working-class feminism; rather, it is for the way she is attuned to Carly's sensibility of privatizing happiness, a sensibility that reverberates in the responsibility Carly feels when her family scripts break down: "What did I do wrong?"

Carly also told us about being struck by stories of families weathering hardships and emerging as stronger, happier families. "I like the sob stories," she said of reading *Parents* magazine:

> Like kids that are born with a disability or were born with some kind of deformity, things like that. I feel for those kids, and it makes me extremely thankful for the family that I have. But at the same time, little stuff, like Rory was born with a hernia, she has to have surgery. . . . I'm terrified. And I blame myself because it's an umbilical hernia. I'm like, "That's where she was connected with me! It's my fault!" It's a minor operation. It's going to be a hell of a lot harder on me than it is on her. But I'm like, "Here's my kid that was born with a problem, and I've got my own sob story." But it's a minor sob story in the realm of . . . . But to see how these parents can take the negative and spin it into a positive and work with their kids and start these foundations and just try to advocate for whatever problem their kid has, it just amazes me. The love and the dedication of a parent to your child, no matter what is, just, it blows me away. It blows me away.

For Carly, "sob stories" tap into an abiding sense of insecurity, a feeling that she only narrowly escaped major health problems, and her ongoing fears that her children's health is on the line. But what truly strikes Carly in these stories is the way families remake hardships into happy stories that put on display both deep familial love and individual families' desire to mitigate other families' pain. These melodramatic narratives certify the family's happy potential, even in the face of looming threats and insufficient vital resources like health care.

Carly's efforts at privatizing happiness for her family are inseparable from the churning of the mamasphere, which at once nurtures and compounds these efforts. While Carly's Facebook albums of "summer fun" were profoundly affirming, other encounters in the digital mundane are agitating

and deeply upsetting for Carly. Recently, her daughter Amanda, typically a happy and outgoing child, began crying daily when Carly dropped her off at school. This caused considerable angst for Carly:

> But it was really weighing on me because I couldn't figure out what was wrong. What is the cause of this? Why did it change four weeks into school? Why did this happen? She keeps saying it's because she misses me. Andrew and I started talking the other night, and I started crying. And I said, "Is it because I'm a stay-at-home mom? Is it because I was with her all the time and now I'm not? Should I have gotten a job and put her in day care? Or put her with a sitter so that she didn't rely on me as much?" He's like, "What are you talking about?!" And I'm like, "I don't know!" I'm looking for any possible scenario to make me figure it out. But I don't blame her, I blame myself for [it]. Like I said, I figured she would walk into kindergarten and own the place. She's outgoing; she's smart; she's funny; she just. . . . She's got everything going for her. And she's acting this way, and I'm saying to myself, "How did I fail her? What did I do wrong?" And it might not even be me. It may be a host of other things, but for some reason I'm internalizing it as "it is my fault."

In her desperate quest to figure out what was going on with Amanda, Carly turned to her digital networks, yet online parenting advice only exacerbated Carly's angst: "I wanted to throw up," she said, "because somebody's like, 'Get your kid checked for ADHD. Get them on medication. Someone's bullying your kid. Someone's touching your kid.'" Carly found these claims outrageous, preferring to think instead that her daughter might simply miss her or feel sensitive about lunchtime after having been reprimanded by the teacher. "Why can't it be a simple answer like that?," she asks. Why do we have "to jump to medicating and bullying and molestation?"

Here we see what Hansen elaborates as the "inherent or constitutive *doubleness*" of contemporary media.[51] As digital, interactive media register "the environmentality of the world itself," at practically any moment mothers can tap into a "digital nervous system" and "*make contact with the present of sensibility*."[52] At the same time, though, this tapping is also a contribution that is captured and coded as part of a system. Hansen puts it this way: "we now live in a world where the very media that give us access to events outside the scope of our conscious attention and perception . . . are now typically events that simultaneously contribute to the growth of this

very domain of sensibility."[53] Mothers like Carly turn to digital media to make sense of the world, and, in turn, digital media sense them, affectively heightening and computationally optimizing the present sensibility of precarity that brought them there in the first place.

Mothers are constantly attuning themselves to the demands of precarized family happiness in the digital mundane. They are elastic—ready to contract and expand, modulate and modify. Indeed, above all, mothering through precarity is about resilience. Resilience is an affective capacity for surviving, weathering, managing risk, and bouncing back. We can think of resilience as a form of what Berlant calls cruel optimism, for it is a mode of optimism that embraces, and even amplifies, the very processes of precarization that are wearing mothers like Carly down in the first place.[54] Resilience, in other words, has mothers willing their families to live a "non-death." As Brad Evans and Julian Reid argue, "it is only by 'learning how to die,' by willing the 'messianic moment' (to borrow from Walter Benjamin) in which death is read more as a condition of affirmation, that it becomes possible to change the present condition and create a new self by 'turning your world upside down.' Resilience cheats us of this affirmative task of learning how to die. It exposes life to lethal principles so that it may live a non-death."[55] Ravaged family lives might be "read . . . as a condition of affirmation"; painful losses and everyday brutalities could open space for reimagined worlds. But the cruel optimism of resilience bounces mothers back into the world as they know it, fostering returns to familiar familial scenes and the mounting, impossible work of privatizing happiness.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that mothers are ideologically duped by cruel optimism but rather that resilience is a profoundly vital mode of attaching and attuning in advanced neoliberalism. And, as we show, the bouncing back of resilience is inseparable from the churning affordances of the mamasphere. In short, the digital mundane hones maternal resilience, helping women to become the seemingly tireless and flexible happiness workers that precarization demands.

MOTHERING THROUGH PRECARITY

The following chapters work to articulate mothering through precarity as "a form of living." Each chapter hones in on a different affective register, tracing through mothers' own voices the prismatic structures that undergird their lives and the work of privatizing family happiness. The chapters

should be read as distinct layers that necessarily echo and bleed into one another, as they seek to capture the compositionality of mothers' lives in the digital mundane.

Chapter 1 accounts for the historicity and government of maternal affect and capacity, tracing how mothers have come to inhabit their roles. Here we provide a sort of affective "history of the present" by situating the ordinary affects that make up everyday family life within shifting discourses of "good" mothering and the broader political-economic contexts that impinge on and animate them. More specifically, this chapter traces how mothers' lives have been affectively loaded up by liberal and neoliberal regimes of family government, especially by family autonomy and its government of mothers. In turn, the work of mothering becomes ever more rife with anxiety and impossibility, as social responsibility for nuclear family life comes to rest ever more squarely on mothers' shoulders: on their everyday decisions, labors, capacities, and practices of self. Mothers' growing loads are made livable, but also compounded, in the mamasphere; while the demands of privatizing happiness stretch and strain mothers' capacities and affects to their breaking points, the mamasphere helps mothers stay pointed, always and anxiously, toward family autonomy.

The next chapter elaborates mamapreneurialism as the primary sensibility of mothering through precarity. Complicating prominent accounts of the mompreneur, we delve into the nitty-gritty everydays of four mothers, exploring how they organize their family worlds through and around privatizing happiness. More specifically, to stabilize their shaky family scenes within the ongoing turbulence of advanced neoliberalism, these mothers are pioneering new ways to appreciate their families in a competitive world where the threat of familial depreciation always lurks and looms. We trace how women—from a comfortable middle-class mother who puts her business acumen and passion to work for her husband's small business in her time away from intensive caretaking to a conservative working-class mom who has turned to vigorous online marketing in the face of her family losing "everything" in the recession—stay oriented toward optimizing their families by tapping into the myriad and mundane affordances of digital media and becoming mamapreneurial.

Chapter 3 explores how affective circuits of precarized family happiness are intimately bound up with the communicative circuits of digital culture. Here we excavate the digital mundane as a potent contact zone quivering with an intense power to mobilize, route, better, and buttress mothers'

lives. Put differently, this chapter is about how mothers come to sustain themselves through digital entanglements; as we show, it is encounters between digital flows and ordinary affects that engender the affective resilience required to mother through precarity. Here we elaborate three primary forms of digital entanglement that at once make possible and complicate mothers' lives: charge, commune, and code and recode. As we show, the mamasphere figures as a crucial affective infrastructure for mothers, making their lives feel livable and brimming with happy potential. However, it also keeps mothers "dog-paddling around" for happiness, even as its horizons continue to recede.[56]

The final chapter is about the modes of collectivity that animate mothering through precarity. More specifically, it is about the ways in which mothers come together to take on the work of privatizing happiness. Indeed, one of the most important ways that mothers weather precarity is through helping each other and sharing their loads. We theorize these interdependencies as *individualized solidarities*, as the aim of collectivity is the stabilization and valorization of individual nuclear families. Mothers feel and act in solidarity with each other, providing significant material and affective support in hopes of keeping one another on the path to privatized happiness. We dig deep into two mothering communities: MOPS (a grassroots, international Christian network devoted to mentoring mothers) and Momastery (an online mothering community that coheres around the microcelebrity of blogger Glennon Doyle Melton). As we show, these communities and the individualized solidarities they engender construct *resiliency nets*, catching mothers as other social safety nets around them fray. Providing aid that ranges from material supports—delivering meals in trying times, raising funds for families in crisis—to affective punches that incite mothers to stay invested in and optimistic about their nuclear families, these nets are organized for resilience.

These chapters are hard, heavy, and seemingly not very hopeful, so, in the conclusion, we reflect on why we wrote such an "unhappy" book. It is important to know that throughout our writing we wrestled with what to do with whatever you want to name the undeniable pull that mothers feel for their families, especially their children. This is perhaps the reproductive power that Adrienne Rich identified at the core of the *experience* of motherhood, that power that she argued must always be contained and controlled by the patriarchal *institution* of motherhood.[57] Ultimately, we decided to leave that maternal power unquestioned as simply that unshakable

affective force that emerges from the precariousness and potentiality of motherhood itself and that compels mothers through their overloaded everydays by infusing them with intense forms of joy and pleasure. We wanted our book to show how this indisputable force is nonetheless historical and subject to assemblages of power of all sorts (not simply patriarchy): it gets channeled, worked on, and exploited in myriad ways and directions.

Put differently, we wanted the experience of reading *Mothering through Precarity* to throw into relief the contingencies and compositionality of contemporary motherhood, so that readers might clearly see, and feel, the loads of privatized family happiness and thereby find new openings for a world of socialized happiness. *Mothering through Precarity* is thus what the Institute for Precarious Consciousness calls "a new style of precarity-focused consciousness raising."[58] Through the voicing of mothers' personal pain and anxiety, we work to articulate the systemic and shared nature of what is felt to be a highly individualized and privatized gender experience. "The goal is produce the *click*—the moment at which the structural source of problems suddenly makes sense in relation to experiences."[59]

NOTES

INTRODUCTION. THE DIGITAL MUNDANE

1 Throughout the book, names of people and places, as well as informant biographical and narrative details, have been altered to preserve anonymity.

2 In her history of "the myths of motherhood," Shari L. Thurer writes, "The vulnerability of children makes us fervently want to be our best selves, to embody tender nurturance and sweet concern. . . . [H]ow our children turn out has become the final judgment on our lives." *Myths of Motherhood*, xiii.

3 See, for example, Douglas and Michaels, *Mommy Myth*; and Hays, *Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*.

4 Cooper, *Cut Adrift*, 23. Cooper argues that mothering today figures as a security project. Specifically, for middle-class families in particular, this security project is about "holding on" as women deal with job losses, debt, and increasing levels of financial insecurity.

5 The project builds on research Julie conducted in graduate school with her advisor, Dr. Laurie Ouellette, on Dr. Phil's multimedia self-help empire. See Ouellette and Wilson, "Women's Work."

6 Ang, "Ethnography and Radical Contextualism," 250. In addition to Ang's work, we also have in mind that of Janice Radway. For methodological discussions, see Ang, "Ethnography and Radical Contextualism," and Radway, "Hegemony of 'Specificity.' "

7 We interviewed three mothers who blog. Two of these women are discussed in chapter 3, the chapter that focuses most heavily on digital media, in the section entitled "Commune." Otherwise, all of the mothers in this study hail from either the Hugo or Ryeland areas.

8 Bird, *Audience in Everyday Life*.

9 Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 13.

10 Bird, "Are We All Producers?"

11 On "nonmedia people," see Couldry, "Playing for Celebrity."

12 Our work aligns with Valerie Walkerdine's sensibility: "what is important to me," she writes, "is to be able to talk not about subcultures or resistance, or an audience

making its continually resistant readings, but about the ordinary working people, who have been coping and surviving, who are formed at the intersection of these competing claims to truth, who are subjects formed in the complexities of everyday practices." *Daddy's Girl*, 13.

13 A Google search for "mommy wars" returns over three million results; the discourse is so rampant that parodies are easy to find. In a Similac ad in 2015 ("The Mother 'Hood"), working moms, breast-feeding moms, "hippie" moms, hipster moms, and stay-at-home dads converge on a playground, preparing for a brawl, before they all come together to rescue a baby in a stroller rolling down a hill ("The Mother 'Hood Official Video," August 4, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Me9yrREXOj4). In a similar vein, in 2015 "mommy blogger" Deva Dalporto produced "Bad Mom," a parody of Taylor Swift's video for "Bad Blood" ("Bad Mom—Taylor Swift—Bad Blood ft. Kendrick Lamar Parody," August 4, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kRk53UfahU).

14 Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 179.

15 See, for example, Douglas and Michaels, *Mommy Myth,* and Walters and Harrison, "Not Ready to Make Nice."

16 Nick Couldry often calls for a decentered media approach. See, for example, *Listening beyond the Echoes.*

17 Gregg, "Mundane Voice," 369.

18 Gregg, "Mundane Voice," 368.

19 Gregg, "Mundane Voice," 364–65.

20 Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 2–3.

21 Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 2–3.

22 Stewart, "Interview with the Author."

23 Stewart, *Ordinary Affects,* 5.

24 Williams, *Marxism and Literature.*

25 Grossberg, "Affect's Future," 318.

26 Lauren Berlant, "Time Out."

27 Of course, we might attribute this particular reticence to television's status as a "bad object," but we suspect there is more going on here.

28 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, as quoted in Puar, "'I Would Rather Be,'" 61.

29 See Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit, *Networked Affect.*

30 Dean, *Blog Theory*, 95.

31 Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*, 29.

32 See Mark Andrejevic's works, such as *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* and *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know*.

33 Mejias, *Off the Network*, 10.

34 As has long been the case, white nuclear mothers, as the alleged primary consumers of domestic goods, are big business for advertisers. As Lynn Spigel shows in *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, the early television industry worked vigorously to shape women's reception by constituting television viewing as integral to women's work as housewives.

Advertisers went so far as to provide instruction to female viewers about how strategic television viewing would enhance their productivity as homemakers, while even making housework pleasurable. In *The Daily You: How the New Advertising Is Defining Your Identity and Your Worth* Joseph Turow documents how today marketing giants like Procter and Gamble work with data-exchange firms to track and record mothers' online activities, access and penetrate their networks, and present them with keenly customized content and advertising. Increasingly, these companies are partnering with well-linked mommy bloggers, paying them small fees in exchange for product reviews or mentions in parenting posts.

35 Mejias, *Off the Network*, 25.

36 Terranova, *Network Culture*, 67.

37 Hansen, *Feed-Forward*, 2.

38 Hansen, *Feed-Forward*, 226.

39 Hansen, *Feed-Forward*, 3.

40 Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 10–15.

41 Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 18–22.

42 Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 2.

43 Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 1.

44 Binkley, *Happiness as Enterprise*, 151–71.

45 Silva, *Coming Up Short*, 21. Our work is indebted to Silva's, especially the link she draws between neoliberalism's privatization of risk and the mood economy, that is, the privatization of happiness. She explains, "Just as neoliberalism teaches young people that they are solely responsible for their economic fortunes, the mood economy renders them responsible for their *emotional* fates."

46 Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness* suggests that the family is a "happy object," an object that points to and promises happiness—belonging, virtue, a good life. However, advanced neoliberalism precarizes this promise, so mothers organize their lives around its securitization.

47 Mothers' responses to neoliberalism and insecurity have been beautifully documented in two recent ethnographies. *Cut Adrift: Families in Insecure Times*, by Marianne Cooper, looks at how families of different socioeconomic backgrounds come to "do security" differently in insecure times. Relatedly, *Motherload: Making It All Better in Insecure Times*, by Ana Villalobos, shows how mothers respond to insecurity by investing in the mother-child relationship.

48 Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, 15–19.

49 Glenn, "Social Constructions of Mothering," 3.

50 Cooper, *Cut Adrift*, 23.

51 Hansen, *Feed-Forward*, 6.

52 Hansen, *Feed-Forward*, 17.

53 Hansen, *Feed-Forward*, 6–7.

54 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

55 Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*, 13.

56 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.

57 Rich, *Of Woman Born*.
58 Institute for Precarious Consciousness, "We Are All Very Anxious."
59 Institute for Precarious Consciousness, "We Are All Very Anxious."

CHAPTER 1. MOTHER LOADS

1 On intensive mothering, see Hays, *Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*.
2 See Villalobos, *Motherload*.
3 In *Motherload* Villalobos calls for a "nonpathological understanding of intensive mothering" (6), which, she argues, figures as mothers' "security solution" for living in the "risk society" (9).
4 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128–35.
5 Douglas and Michaels, *Mommy Myth*, 4.
6 Douglas and Michaels, *Mommy Myth*, 4.
7 Villalobos suggests that "intensive mothering is not as much child-centered as it is 'mother-child-centered.'" *Motherload*, 11. In risk society, she argues, mothers find a sense of security in their relationship with their children.
8 Brown, *States of Injury*, 144–45.
9 Brown, *States of Injury*, 147.
10 Brown, *States of Injury*, 147.
11 Brown, *States of Injury*, 149–50.
12 On connections between white wealth and the organization of family, see Collins, "All in the Family."
13 Black family life is often imagined to stand in stark contrast to the ideal of family autonomy; through "domestic networks," responsibility for childrearing is managed and spread across a range of households and caregivers in response to economic and social forces. See Stack, *All Our Kin*. Black mothers, especially single black mothers, have been vilified and sometimes criminalized for these arrangements, as they signal dependency and mark a "culture of poverty." See Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains*. While research shows that mothers have been rewriting what family autonomy looks like in response to broader political-economic forces for decades, its racialized dimensions continue to shape mothers' sensibilities; see Stacey, *Brave New Families*; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*.
14 See Foucault, "Governmentality" and "Ethics."
15 Dean, "Foucault, Government," 222.
16 On maternal anxiety, see, for example, Warner, *Perfect Madness*.
17 Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 129.
18 See Apple, *Perfect Motherhood*.
19 Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 132.
20 Ezzo and Bucknam, *On Becoming Babywise*.
21 Plant, *Mom*, 7.
22 See Plant, *Mom*, 86–117.
23 See Apple, *Perfect Motherhood*; and Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 76–108.