Reproducing Inequality: Cooking, Cleaning, and Caring in the Austerity Age

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation considers the experiences of unemployed people with unpaid labor in and around their homes in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008. Unemployed people perform increased amounts of cooking, cleaning, and caring labor for themselves, for their families, and for others. The experience of these practices differs for participants with different intersecting class, gender, racial identities, and different physical locations in and surrounding the Midwestern city of Columbus, Ohio, which has recently earned a reputation as a city with immense opportunities due to its engagement in race-to-the-bottom economic incentives for employers. Comparing participants’ discussions of their increased role in unpaid labor reveals that the experience is an overall positive and empowering one for participants, while it contributes to the further limitation of opportunities at job and financial advancement and personal and familial well-being. The dissertation argues that these labors not only constitute critical, unrecognized contributions to the reproduction of the current austere, neoliberal economy, but also that the effects of these labors on the individuals performing them, and the stories they tell about this performance, reproduce the inequalities that put them on different trajectories from the outset. These labors produce, reproduce, and deepen existing material and ideological inequalities in and across the working and not-working classes, particularly through the different effects of this work on participants’ relationships to time, place, and
others. The dissertation concludes with proposals for strategies which could reduce the inequality-producing effects of unpaid labor during unemployment and proposes a social-reproduction political framework for resisting the current austerity-entrenched political discourse.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation is the product of years of dialogue with and guidance from my two co-advisors, Mytheli Sreenivas and Steve Lopez. I have been incredibly lucky to have their time and support throughout the development of this project. Their ready-willingness to work with me as co-advisors and to go above and beyond what has been required of them has made working on this project as straightforward and smooth as could be expected. I am also grateful to Jill Bystydzienski for serving on my dissertation and my exam committees and for her thoughtful feedback during all the phases of my graduate career.

Embarking on this research over the last several years has made me intensely aware of the unpaid labor my friends and family members invest in me on a daily basis. I’d like to thank the many friends that have made up my support network in Columbus throughout these seven years, beginning with my Master’s degree cohort and including the many friends I have made since then, many of whom have now moved far from Columbus, but remain like family to me. Likewise, I’m grateful to my comrades, near and far, for their regular acts of inspiration. The community of activists and organizers I have surrounding me, and their compassion, energy, and sharp political perspectives, have been indispensable to this process.

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My parents, Wes Swenson and Cheryl Cofie, have always encouraged me to seek answers to the biggest questions I could ask, to read everything I could find, and then to make the arguments I want to make without fear, regardless of how popular or unpopular my arguments may be. Their commitment to raising their sons and daughters as curious, independent, and engaged people, laid the groundwork for this project many years ago.

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List of Figures

Figure 1. Gender, Race and Pre-Job Event Income of Participants Who Discussed Increase in Unpaid Labor ................................................................. 6

Figure 2. Participants’ Annual Estimated Income Ranges ........................................... 15
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii  
Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................................... iv
Vita ......................................................................................................................................................... vi  
List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................ vii
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................... viii
Introduction: Methods and Research Design ...................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Social Reproduction and the Polarization of Unpaid Labor ........................................... 26

Chapter 2: “Not Working” in a Hard-Working City ............................................................................ 51

Chapter 3: Housework as a Silver Lining to Job Loss ....................................................................... 74

Chapter 4: Ambivalence, Alienation, and the Reproduction of Devaluation ................................. 103

Chapter 5: The Deepening of Inequality through Family and Financial Debts ........................... 136

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 173

References .......................................................................................................................................... 189

Appendix A: Interview Guide ............................................................................................................ 195

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer .......................................................................................................... 197
Introduction: Methods and Research Design

In 2012 I set out with colleagues in the Sociology Department of Ohio State to study local, individuals’ experiences of what many were calling the Great Recession. It had been more than four years since financial markets in the United States had plummeted, following the collapse of the housing market and the subsequent disintegration of several major banks that were heavily invested in the subprime lending industry. Unemployment rates shot up almost instantly, more than doubling to ten percent nationally, as people lost their jobs not only in the banks that had folded, but in the industries that had been reliant on them for financing, including construction and manufacturing (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). A second wave of layoffs came as the fallout reached federal, state, and local governments across the country. Tax revenues had plummeted far lower than government budgets could have projected, and when the money simply could not be found to continue to operate as usual, huge numbers of workers in government-funded and government-contracted industries lost their jobs (Abramovitz 2012: 32-33). The crisis also created a political opportunity to cut living standards of those who had been some of the U.S.’s most protected workers, as legislation cast as emergency measures

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1 The project was led by Professor Steven Lopez with early assistance from Professor Vincent Roscigno, and a team of six graduate students from the Department of Sociology and myself from the Department of Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies at Ohio State University. The project was financially supported by a grant from the American Studies Association’s Fund for the Advancement of the Discipline.
across the country attacked public unions, who also happened to be disproportionately made up of women and people of color (Abramovitz 2012: 33).

The period in which the U.S. economy was in an actual recession, that is, when the nation’s gross domestic product declined for consecutive quarters of the business cycle, lasted from December 2007 to June 2009 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012: 1). Despite the end of the formal recession almost three years earlier, in 2011, most Americans were still feeling pessimistic about the U.S. economy and its opportunities (Morgan 2011), and despite ever-improving official reports on unemployment, many long-term unemployed and underemployed individuals were reeling. Long-term unemployment rates (unemployment for 27 weeks or longer) peaked at 4.4 percent, almost two times the highest long-term unemployment rates recorded in over fifty years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012: 2), before many people assumed the longest-term unemployed had fallen out of the statistics as they stopped actively seeking work. The U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2011 that median household wealth had declined by almost 7 percent since 2000 (Vornovitsky, Gottschalk, and Smith 2011). These trends toward loss of wealth and loss of employment, it seemed, had both begun before and continued after the formal Great Recession. Rather than referring to a particular period of shrinking GDP, then, the Great Recession began to describe the years-long state of the U.S. economy, a reality almost everyone looking for work knew they were experiencing.

As we developed the key questions of the study, a gendered, classed, and racialized, picture of the recession and its effects was just emerging, along with an early conversation about the nature and pace of the recovery (Strolovitch 2014). Men had lost
more jobs than women, but seemed to be recovering new jobs more quickly than women (Abramovitz 2012); Black and Latino families had lost far more wealth than white families and were expected to continue on that path as they faced devastating foreclosure rates (Kochhar, Fry, and Taylor 2011), and financial markets and the elites most connected to them were bouncing back quickly while the vast majority of U.S. workers were bracing for a long recovery. As the statistics on the general shape of the Recession and recovery rolled in, our goal was to elicit narratives of those affected by the economic crisis that could provide insights into the effects of the downturn on individuals’ attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and relationships, without losing a sense of their particular life contexts in the process. The researchers involved in the project sought to collect substantial, detailed, and yet broad enough narratives of living through the recession that multiple, overlapping topics related to work, job loss, family, and U.S. inequality could be studied using the data.

Though the scholars involved in the project came with various theoretical frameworks for studying the recession and work in different fields of sociology, we were united in our goal of obtaining individual narratives of the recession that covered a broad array of topics which were of interest to researchers as well as those salient to the unemployed, but which researchers might not yet be noting. We developed our interview guide and our mode of analysis collectively as we went into the field to speak with people affected by the recession and read their stories. Our research team attended job fairs, meet-ups, and celebrations for those receiving the help of a local non-profit either to stay in their homes or to pay rent for their apartments, and partnered with a local association
of food banks in order to recruit job seekers in and around the city of Columbus to our study. We also posted fliers around the city advertising our study (Appendix B), and sent emails to individuals who posted their resumes publicly on Craigslist and the job site Indeed.com to ask whether they would be interested in our study. During site visits, we introduced ourselves to people seeking services or job interviews as opportunities arose, told them about the purpose of our study, and asked if they might be interested in telling us about their job and income situations.

Though it was an impossible task to distinguish between those whose predicament was a direct effect of the Great Recession and those who might have been in the same position with or without a Recession, we screened participants in these recruitment spaces for a few characteristics to qualify for a further interview. Essentially, a person qualified for the study if they were either job seeking, employed outside their desired field, under-employed, or had recently gone back to school as a result of some major disruption in a way they had lived or earned for two or more years. Even if that disruption could not be immediately traced back to the Recession, their experience of coping with it, like job seeking, surely would be affected by it. If we determined the person might be a candidate for our study in that initial contact, we invited them to meet with us at a future date, most often at a public library near their home or work, and to spend some time telling us their stories and answering questions about their experiences, in exchange for a $30 cash payment we used to compensate all those who dedicated their time to talking with us.
Over the course of the next year, we interviewed 92 people about their experiences of job seeking and/or job displacement. We interviewed nearly equal numbers of men and women, and a racially and economically diverse population, though we oversampled African Americans to account for their over-representation among the unemployed in the Columbus area. We utilized a thematic interview guide (Appendix A), to help us lead the interviews, though we gave each interviewer the freedom to approach the interview in a way that was most helpful to the interviewee. We most often began by asking the participants to tell us about their work histories and how they got in the position of job seeking. Most participants were eager to tell the story of how they became unemployed, or their history of searching for stable employment. During this conversation, often with minimal prompting from the interviewer, participants inevitably spoke also of their family lives, marital statuses, educations, and their socioeconomic status before and after their job loss. Interviewers also asked about participants’ feelings concerning most of these matters, as well as questions that prompted participants to share their views of the world and their current predicaments. Interviews lasted between one and four hours.

In the year following these initial interviews, I reviewed the transcripts and flagged 60 interviews in which participants discussed an increase in unpaid labor as a result of their unemployment.
I performed six follow-up interviews with participants whose stories I found particularly exemplary of what I was finding about reproductive labor across the sample, or from whom I needed more information to fully understand their experience of it and what it meant to them. I have included some references to these follow-up interviews.
when relevant, though the dissertation mainly seeks to contribute an understanding of what we can learn about these experiences at one moment in time, rather than to provide evidence that particular outcomes will necessarily follow particular experiences of unemployment.

With the transcripts of these interviews, our research team performed two rounds of general coding, one which coded participants’ utterances by topic (i.e. job, family, social services, etc.), and a second which coded utterances for more abstract features, which could help sort between particular kinds of statements, such as action/behavior, event, and valence. Additionally, we created a cross-sectional reference guide for basic demographic and income information, so the data could be easily searched on a variety of questions related to who experienced what phenomena and how they felt about that. With these data at my disposal, I began sorting the transcripts between those participants who described performing more unpaid labor, a category that includes care work, domestic work, and affective labor (work intended to create an emotional experience in a group or person), as a result of their unemployment or under-employment, and those who did not. I found that two-thirds of participants reported an increase in unpaid labor, though three-fourths of the women did, and just half of the men did.

After reading the transcripts of participants who increased their labor during the Recession especially closely, Steven Lopez and I developed a system for coding the meaning or motivation of this labor for participants (the findings of which are discussed in Swenson and Lopez 2016). From these data, I was able to understand and describe some general trends, which I will describe in detail in the first chapter. The majority of
the dissertation relies on close readings and contextualized analyses of the experiences of a few exemplary or confounding participants. I decided on particular transcripts and corresponding individual stories to focus on for the purposes of a close content analysis, the result of which makes up the majority of the chapters that follow.

For the most part, my analysis examines the experiences of individuals I was able to meet with personally, either for their initial interview or a follow-up interview. I focus on these interviews because being with the individual in person has given me a better sense of their tone, mood, and general persona, and this has been helpful to understanding the things they said in the course of their interview. But some participants who were interviewed by my colleagues have provided rich descriptions of their lives and how they feel about them, and offer ample material for understanding how their experiences of crisis and reproductive labor fit within the rest of their lives. Additionally, even those interviews that I do not specifically analyze in this dissertation were crucial to giving perspective on those I did focus on and in presenting a more general picture of the effects of economic crisis on a diverse population. Every aspect of the dissertation relies on the participation of individuals who were facing excruciatingly uncertain moments in their lives and a host of difficult day-to-day financial and emotional dilemmas. I cannot overstate their generosity in sharing their stories with us, given their difficult circumstances.

The Sample

Of 92 participants our team interviewed about the experience of joblessness in the
aftermath of the Recession, 63 participants, or just above two-thirds of the overall sample, spoke about an increase in their unpaid labor as a result of their joblessness. Though the team of us involved did not gather these data with the intention of creating a sample that was representative of the unemployed population nationally or locally, and from which generalizable data about experiences could be gleaned, this two-thirds figure for unemployed people who increased their unpaid labor in the aftermath of the Great Recession does align closely with quantitative studies that analyze the time-use on a more generalizable scale (Berik and Aguiar 2014).

Of these 60, 46 spoke about their experience of unpaid labor for more than one utterance (a statement or series of statements uninterrupted by questions or prompts from the interviewer) of the overall interview transcript, making it possible for me to identify both a valence (positive, negative, or ambivalent) and a meaning or several meanings (silver lining, obligation, disutility) in their description of the work. The dissertation focuses on these participants who discussed unpaid work beyond a brief mention of an activity that they might do as a part of their day. 22 of these people were men and 24 were women.

A dozen or so additional women talked about spending a significant amount of their time engaged in cleaning, cooking, and caring activities, but did not consider this to have been a change brought on by their unemployment. Instead, the frequent engagement in reproductive labor during unemployment matched their experience while they were employed; these women often lived alone or were single parents. The continuity of their experiences of social reproductive labor before and during unemployment makes their
stories less fruitful in understanding the impact of moving from a situation in which one’s identity as worker is mainly from paid work to unpaid work, but the experiences of these women should be counted as further evidence of the argument of this dissertation: that the normalized long-term unemployed are key social reproducers in the age of post-economic crisis austerity. In other words, the fact that as many men as women spoke about increasing their unpaid labor during unemployment is not indicative of any parity in the amount of unpaid work men and women were doing during unemployment in the Great Recession. In fact, for many women in the study, it is much more likely that either their amount of unpaid labor was already high and unchanged, or that they found it so normal as to be unremarkable.

Intersecting inequalities across the unemployed

This dissertation focuses on the different relationships between identities, experiences, and inequalities across the diverse class of unemployed workers borne out of the aftermath of the Great Recession. Though the data set used in this dissertation allows for the categorization of participants along demographic lines, direct comparisons across income, demographic category, and even experience-type, are unreliable due to the somewhat random selection of participants and the small sample size. Instead the data set makes possible more holistic comparisons based on the intersection of these factors in the context of individuals’ larger life narratives and their presentations of these factors as they tell their overall story of unemployment in the current era. It is the comparison of
participants in relatively similar circumstances, at a mostly similar historical juncture and in a general metropolitan area that makes this intersectional analysis a possibility.

Throughout the dissertation, I use the words “inequality” and “intersectional inequality” to describe a number of particular material circumstances, but also at times as a catchall term for a cumulative divide between participants who feel they have options and cushions to survive their unemployment without great peril, and those who do not. The term “intersectionality” here describes the multiple, relatively autonomous oppressions that are constitutive of a subjective experience of relative disadvantage by an individual as they relate to others and to social institutions (Yuval Davis 2006). But I do not assume that the different identity categories or oppressions included in the constitution of these experiences have separate and distinct ontological bases and Yuval Davis and other constitutive intersectionality theorists do.

I view the categories of socioeconomic class, race, and gender (as well as age, sexuality, disability, etc., although substantive analysis of these categories is beyond the scope of the data collected in this study) as historically salient forms of difference that are constitutive of a capitalist social totality that could not function at a basic structural level without stratification and hierarchy. As Susan Ferguson and David McNally write, “[R]acism and sexism are not historical aberrations that can somehow be separated from capitalism’s ‘real’ or ‘ideal’ functioning. Rather, they are integral to and determinant of – in the sense that they really and actively facilitate – actual processes of capital dispossession and accumulation” (2015b). It is only in the whole analysis of individuals’ subjective experiences that one can attempt evidence-based analyses of the multiple kinds
of difference constituting their experience. This cumulative, intersecting inequality includes not just different levels of access to material resources, but to different affective experiences of unemployment, including the opportunities to feel hope, optimism, and self-efficacy, or, on the other hand, self-doubt, self-blame, alienation, and pessimism. In addition to considering the participants’ identities and the meanings of those identities, I also focus on a few chief dimensions of material inequality as I compare participants’ situations and attempt to understand the reasons for their vastly different experiences of unpaid labor during unemployment.

*Geographic inequality*

Neighborhood of residence in the city for participants from Columbus, as well as quality of the suburb or town of residence (and its proximity to the city) for those outside it has a great impact on the participants’ experiences of unemployment and social reproduction. Living in some neighborhoods meant there were opportunities for jobs nearby, but for others, a particular neighborhood, suburb, or small town life could put major limitations on job prospects.

Automobile access and ownership and the ability to drive thus emerge as important features of several participants’ experiences of unemployment and their time use. In the winter of 2012, for instance, I had scheduled an appointment to interview one participant whom a colleague had met at a job fair. She was from a mostly affluent suburb just North of the city. I was set to meet with her in a week at the public library in her suburb, when she called me one morning and told me she was near my campus for a
meeting with a temporary employment agency. She asked whether I could meet that afternoon instead of the next week, since she was nearby. I told her I did not have a meeting space reserved that would give us any privacy (many participants were concerned about whether people could overhear our conversations), but she insisted she did not mind the lack of privacy and asked if we could meet at a fast food restaurant across from the campus in a couple of hours. I agreed and met up with her for the interview. She told me over the course of the interview that she had wanted to move our meeting forward because she did not have the money to put gas in her car that day and was worried she would not have made it home if we had not met and if I had not given her the $30 compensation for her participation in the interview.

This experience highlighted just how dire her financial circumstances were, but also how, in this case, residing in a wealthy suburb was bringing with it additional challenges for her during her unemployment, rather than merely being a source of relative advantage or privilege. The need to come to the city to pursue employment prospects and the cost of doing so made her life in the suburb a disadvantage for her. The participant’s location itself, then, cannot be used to simply deduce advantage or disadvantage, without understanding that location in the context of the participants’ overall circumstances and life narrative. For this woman, being cash poor in a job-scarce but affluent suburb was a disadvantage in at least this aspect of the cost of the job search. Though neighborhood matters, the median income or reputation of a neighborhood does not automatically connote privilege or disadvantage in the job search or in the basic day-to-day work of stringing together resources to get by during unemployment.
The question of transportation was also a serious one for participants who lived within city limits. One participant who lived in the South Linden neighborhood of Columbus lost his job as a truck driver for a construction company and had to sell his car in order to pay rent. While he occasionally scraped up the money for a bus pass, he spent a good portion of his day walking: walking to a mosque that was three miles from his apartment where he sought spiritual comfort regarding his predicament, walking the city looking for job openings, and walking to and from public libraries where he used the computers and applied for jobs online. Though the walking itself proved to have some benefits—he had lost weight, felt healthier, and liked having the opportunity to think—it also took an enormous amount of his time each day, cutting into his time for the job search, and leaving almost no time for leisure or socializing. He also felt incredibly isolated by this and described himself as a loner.

His experience showed how geographic or housing inequality prior to unemployment impacted the participants’ options and strategies during unemployment, and suggested that these strategies were likely to have far-reaching costs even after his immediate crisis had ended, beyond financial repercussions. How much longer would it take him to find a job because he moved around on foot than it might have if he had a car? How much more difficult would it be for him to find a job while he was limited to walking and occasional bus use, instead of being able to drive to potential employers that were located in distant neighborhoods or outside the city altogether? And after all this related social isolation, what would his social circle look like if and when he finally found a job?
Interviewers asked each participant in this study about his or her income both before and after their job event (for most, this event was their being laid off or fired, though some lost a significant amount of hours or income). Some participants were able to tell us specifically how much they earned annually in previous years, and expected to earn in the current one. But these were often difficult questions for participants who had earned an hourly wage, rather than a salary, who had experienced job turbulence for a long time prior to the recession and never had a steady annual income, and for those who simply were not sure how much they were cobbled together from multiple jobs, receiving from loved ones, or receiving from governmental or other welfare programs. For most participants, estimating their income at the time of the interview was more difficult than estimating it prior to their job loss, due to the many factors involved in those calculations while their lives were relatively chaotic. Because this study was not a formal survey and necessarily did not attempt to verify participants’ answers through official records, we
often made best-guess estimates of their incomes based on what they told us they were earning at their various jobs and how many hours and days they were working. This study’s participants held incomes ranging from less than $10,000/year to more than $100,000/year before their job loss, the distribution of which over the whole sample has been detailed in Figure 2 above.

The question of income of individual participants is even more complicated by their family dynamics. Some participants might describe a low personal income, but also have access to the income of a partner or other family member in or even outside the household. In other words, the figure they quoted as their income alone did not provide a clear sense of what access to money they actually had on a regular basis, how much they could spend, and how secure they felt while they sought paid work. This is one reason why considering inequality in the context of participants’ descriptions of their lives as a whole is so important to this analysis.

As Reardon and Bischoff (2011) show, income inequality also interacts with geography, as people at the top and bottom of the income distribution chart tend to live near each other. Policies in individual cities have led to the increase in income-based segregation in recent years, where those who are affluent and those who are not live in different neighborhoods of American cities. They show furthermore that those in the highest income quintiles are most geographically concentrated. Due most of all to participant recruitment strategies, this study does not include residents of the most elite neighborhoods or the wealthiest one percent of individuals in our society. Their Great Recession stories will not be included with the middle and low-income participants
discussed here, perhaps one more manifestation of the growing divisions between rich and poor.

*Wealth inequality*

Participants’ wealth is even more difficult to measure and accurately compare than their income, given the structure of this study as well as the sheer practical difficulty of tallying one’s own wealth. That being said, a consideration of their overall possession of financial assets is an equally important financial consideration in analyzing the relationship between material inequality and the experience of job seeking after the Great Recession. Some studies show that wealth inequality is even more impactful than income inequality on a number of life prospects.

For some participants, their ability to maintain their wealth profile while they were unemployed was a sign for them that they had not been hit too hard yet, and gave interviewers timelines for when they would have to start turning to these assets if they did not find work by then. Other participants were forced to turn to these assets for support. Many participants were able to cushion themselves during unemployment by leaning on their wealth, especially retirement accounts. On the other hand, some participants had only debt and no wealth, and this put them in a position where even if they were to find work, they would not only be hard-pressed to accumulate any savings or cushion for themselves in the near future, but would likely continue to experience financial insecurity and struggle to meet their own basic needs for some time. As an extreme example of this, one man my colleagues interviewed had gotten a part-time job to tide himself over until
he found better work, but soon found that his wages there would be garnished by the
government, after he had been convicted of fraud for providing false information to the
government about the circumstances of his dismissal from work in order to draw
unemployment insurance. While unemployment or underemployment for some meant the
slowing or temporary halting of wealth accumulation, for others, it meant a continual
sinking into debt.

Social network inequality
Sociologists have long known that differences in the quantity and quality of the
relationships that make up individuals’ social lives are significant to a number of life
outcomes, and job prospects are especially dependent on social network access. “Who
you know” is a proven, significant factor in job-seeking success (Lin and Dumin 1986;
Podolny and Baron 1997). Men, on average, receive higher overall quality of job leads
from their network than women do (Huffman and Torres 2016). Participants in this study
demonstrate that social network not only matters to finding a job, but to how well
participants can get by while they do not have one. On one extreme end of this social
network access, there are participants like Laura, whom I will write about at some length
in chapter four, whose parents give her $600 in income each month and intend to do so
even after she finds a job. She uses the money to pay her mortgage, allowing her to live
on the few hundred dollars a week she makes by working at a bicycle shop part-time, and
thus giving her time to go back to school, work in her garden, and fix up her house. On
the other hand, there are participants in this study who are supporting multiple family
members and even multiple generations of family with their own limited incomes. Not only are they not receiving financial help from their families or social networks more broadly, but they feel they are responsible for providing that help to them.

The interview participants in this study performed unequal amounts of unpaid labor during their period of unemployment, ranging from participants whose days were consumed by caring for their family members to participants who found unemployment had been a time for leisure and new hobbies and some who found there were now family members who would do more unpaid work for them, to help them through their job loss. Likewise, not all participants who did perform significant unpaid labor experienced that labor in the same ways or with the same consequences. Their self-reproduction is essential to the reproduction of the socioeconomic whole, in this case, the vagabond capitalism of neoliberal U.S. cities, making possible both the profitability of the economic turbulence and corporate mobility they create, and the claims of success, growth, and improvement local politicians and officials make as a result.

The unemployed perform social reproductive labor that sustains members of society beyond their own individual lives. But just what particular kinds of attitudes, ideas, behaviors, and relationships this produces, reproduces, and disrupts depends on the intersecting factors listed above and so many others that are particular to these individuals’ lives. For some, these self-reproductive and social reproductive labors are part of a strategy of sustenance that increases material and/or emotional and psychological stability during unemployment. Some feel positively about this strategy, while others as I will discuss in chapter three, feel used up and unfulfilled by this strategy
even as they recognize its importance in their moving on. And for others, regardless of how they feel about performing the labor, it has a negative impact on their ability to cope with their unemployment and to pursue a variety of strategies for improving their economic and personal lives. Rather than sustaining them, social reproductive labor drains them. As a result, I will show in the following chapters, this labor reproduces more than individuals and socioeconomic systems—it also reproduces inequality itself.

Chapter Outline

Utilizing the narratives and the demographic data these interviews produced, this dissertation examines experiences of increased unpaid labor among men and women facing economic distress in the aftermath of the recent economic crisis. The bulk of the dissertation examines the major, different experiences with unpaid labor common in the study by focusing on a few participants who best exemplified these experience-types: those who rely on unpaid labor for its subjective value to maintaining their identities during unemployment, those who find unpaid household labor to be a boon to them and their families (those for whom it is objectively and subjectively valuable), those who increase their unpaid labor because they know it is relatively important during job loss, but are nonetheless eager to return to work due to its negative effects on their subjectivity and sense of self, and those who must perform unpaid work to stay afloat during unemployment, but regardless of their feelings about it, are experiencing negative repercussions from this use of their time (those for whom it is both objectively necessary and negative). I posit that alongside growing wealth polarization (a growing gap between
rich and poor), the U.S. faces what I call unpaid labor polarization. Unpaid labor polarization describes an increasing divide between those for whom the performance of unpaid labor is generally a positive experience with clear benefits to the individual and household and those for whom it is an added burden that prevents individuals from pursuing economic and social opportunities.

In chapter one I highlight one participant, Linda, who embodies the struggle between work and family identities of participants struggling to make ends meet in the current economy, and the centrality of unpaid labor to her period of unemployment, when her balance between these two identities is put into turmoil. Using this particular participant as a guide, I then introduce the theoretical frameworks I utilize at various points to perform a content analysis of stories like Linda’s. In particular, I describe the insights of social reproduction feminism and its ability to address the intersections of gender, race, and class in constructing and reproducing the global economic system. I then outline the key tools and modes of analysis I borrow from Black feminist thought, including Patricia Hill Collins’ concept of controlling images, from the interdisciplinary feminist theories of kinship and the family, and from the sociology of work and housework. The key frame includes a flexible approach to defining the family, where I take the lead from the subject him or herself in characterizing who is and is not part of the family and what the family means to that individual, and constant intersectional awareness of the historically and geographically constructed differences of these experiences.
Accordingly, chapter two situates my study in the particular political-economic context of Columbus, Ohio. I argue that Columbus represents a compelling case study in what Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore term “the emergence of the local” (2002: VI) as well as the neoliberal processes by which the local has supplanted the nation-state in determining individuals’ economic opportunities and the shape they will take in a given area. I argue that social reproductive processes, like production processes, are contested within this landscape in which hard work and the value of being a harder worker are paramount to individuals’ identities, especially among those who feel their ability to contribute to society as a whole has been threatened by the current political economic order. Lastly, I show that it is vital to study inequality between non-working workers in order to understand not only the social order in this new age of normalized long-term unemployment, but to understand the divergent kinds of social identities, anxieties, and world views that are being produced and reproduced under this social order.

In the third chapter, I analyze the most significant breaks with the disutility fallacy my data offer, by analyzing the experiences and the narratives of men and women who reported positive experiences of increased reproductive labor during unemployment or underemployment, and who saw a clear personal and familial benefit from being able to do this work. Participants in this category have an overall positive experience of unpaid labor during unemployment, finding that it allows them quality time with their children and the space and time to nurture a home environment they value but were unable to maintain while they were employed. For many individuals, this is a positive opportunity because they see the time they spend in unpaid work as an investment in their
lives and their families’ lives that will translate to further success in the future, once the job market recovers. Many of those in this category were high-income individuals, and most of them white, who were receiving unemployment benefits, had significant money in savings, or were partnered with a middle- or high-earning spouse who cushioned them during their unemployment. These individuals seem to have felt less panic about the job search, and were able to enjoy their time off more as a vacation, and the unpaid labor they did as a vacation activity.

The fourth chapter covers individuals in similar financial and familial situations who expressed resentment toward an increase in unpaid labor, and yet who affirmed its value to their lives both through their performance of it, and their discussion of that labor and what it is they don’t like about it. I show that the primary reasons for middle-income people not liking the labor are not overt sexist ideas about who should do it, but two major concerns: one, being the scale of the labor and its effects, and a sense that it feels too narrow and too local to create a satisfactory impact, and second, that it feels unappreciated and taken for granted by those around them. I propose a paradigm for better understanding the valences of housework at the level of individuals that accounts for a complex relationship between social value, experience, and ideology. I argue that the ambivalence of these participants about unpaid reproductive labor reflects not only the devaluation of housework and the gender ideologies they have and see in others, but also their own recognition of the two, polarized directions in which this labor can pull them.
For some in the study, particularly those most dependent on extended family during their financial duress, due to their own lack of wealth to cushion them, performing unpaid labor is an act of survival. In the fifth chapter, I show how personal financial debts and a dwindling public safety net set some individuals on a course of performing more unpaid labor that will only deepen those debts, along with family or emotional debts to those in their networks of survival. Different and unequal experiences of unpaid labor are contributing factors to widening economic inequality in the U.S., and we must accordingly have an increased focus on unpaid work in proposed policies related to wealth inequality in the U.S. Policymakers cannot rely on family labor as a coping mechanism for economic crisis, because these strategies will have long-term consequences for individuals who struggle the most and for the economy as a whole.

In the conclusion, I expound upon the implications of the emergence of increasingly distinct experiences and effects of unpaid reproductive labor that my data reveal, both for individuals and for the future politics of global capitalism in the U.S. I argue that though there are myriad social-welfare policies that could alleviate the worst effects of unemployment and unpaid labor for the most marginalized individuals in this study, the real problem with moving forward is creating the political will for such policies in the neoliberal political culture self-blame and individual-efficacy I describe throughout the dissertation. I argue that the social reproduction framework is a potential avenue to making politicians as well as everyday people like those I describe in this dissertation see the unemployed as productive people deserving of support. Social reproduction feminism is not only a framework for analyzing the sites and inequalities of
labor under contemporary global capitalism, but a potential political intervention into the framing of those who work and those who do not, which is not only perceived by actively reproduced by the research subjects across the spectrum of experience described in each chapter.
Chapter 1: Social Reproduction and the Polarization of Unpaid Labor

Linda had lived through enough job-related upheavals to acquire some strong feelings about the importance of having a job.

I think [jobs] are part of your identity. I don’t think it—it shouldn’t be all of it, but it is what you do every day, a good portion of your life. So um, it gives people meaning, you know. And your job is based on everything: it’s where you live, it’s what you do, it’s what you eat, it’s where you go, you know, it all depends on whether or not you can afford it, and—I think it’s a huge portion of someone’s identity, and it’s also good to be out with different types of people, you know, like at work, instead of at home, that interaction is very important, you know, that you’re contributing to your household or your industry, or, you know, that type of thing.

A 53-year-old white woman living in a racially diverse, working-class northwest Columbus neighborhood, she was experiencing her fifth month of unemployment, after being laid off from a major health insurance company where she had done clerical work for a modest salary of 30 thousand dollars a year. She’d already been downsized twice in the three years prior, before the current layoff came, since the financial crisis had wrecked the insurance industry. In the last three years, she had gone through two other
bouts of receiving no income, and was now going on several years without health insurance.

A divorced mother of five, she still had one daughter living at home. Her boyfriend, George, lived with them as well. Thankfully, he was employed full-time at a bank, and making about forty or forty-five thousand a year, she guessed. George’s salary was keeping her and her daughter securely under a roof and able to buy groceries while she looked for a new job. She joked that she wished she could afford a facelift to help the job search. Though she had been employed in corporate jobs since she was 22, taking only a few breaks for maternity leave to take care of her five children, she had been able to put money away in a retirement account for only about eight years of her working life. But unemployment and a series of family emergencies had depleted her meager retirement funds and additional savings in the last year:

I was still outta work in December, you know, and I wanted to have Christmas for my children, and we just kinda lived on it, or some of it. But yeah, it did dwindle down to nothin’. Um, my father was in the military and my mother worked for, um, the military until she retired, and he had left us—or they had given us, at one point, I think ten thousand dollars to put it like in an Edward Jones account type of thing, ‘cause that’s what she’s in, and I ended up using all of that, and I think she, every once in awhile, she does it again. She’s able to do that every once and a while for my sisters and I, and I think she’s done it twice and I’ve used every dime.
Linda had not only depleted her own savings to keep herself and her household afloat, but had depleted wealth set aside for her by her parents. The money had stayed in the family though, with most of it going to support their family’s Christmas celebration, and to help out Linda’s adult children who were living away from home. She described what happened to the money:

I’d use a lot of it to help my children. Like, my oldest daughter […], she broke her hand about six weeks ago, and she’s a dog groomer at Pet Supply or something […]. She has only worked there about six months, I think, but you can’t really groom dogs with one broken hand. So she’s been outta work, you know, so I paid her rent one month, and caught her electric up, and you know, things like that. So I have helped out my daughter and things. So, I mean, it’s not just—it’s just normal stuff, you know. I mean, I would help them even if I was working, but I happen to have that available, so—and I wasn’t able to help them with a salary, so I just dug into that and I feel—I thought, ‘I can’t watch them suffer while that’s sittin’ there.’

Just like that, wealth that had been built up over the course of her mother and father’s working lives had been spent in a matter of months, passed from one generation to the next, and then to the next, before it was used to pay for essential but ephemeral expenses in a flash. Linda did have some minor income coming in the form of unemployment insurance, but that would end before long, too. She was, in essence, one romantic relationship away from absolute poverty, both in
the present, and, because she had no retirement fund, in her future old age. And although her access to some family wealth had allowed her to ease the suffering of her adult children, not having a job was causing Linda herself to suffer, and not just financially. Despite taking on all the household chores and doing everything she could to support her children, she suspected that the biggest reason for her suffering was, as she put it, “not feeling like you have a purpose, you know, you have somewhere to be, something to contribute, a contribution to make.” She did feel she had those things when she was working, and feeling those things at work changed how she felt about being at home. “And then you come home. You know, I think it kind of rounds you out, ‘cause you have, you know, then you come home and you have that part of your life. You have this part, and then you have this part,” she said. And when you no longer have that job “part?” “You lose your motivation,” she said.

While Linda complained that she was under-motivated and unfulfilled without a paid work life to “round” her out, she also loved the opportunity her unemployment presented to work on a different part of herself, the mothering, cleaning, at-home one. Just moments after she described her melancholy, incomplete, and under-stimulated state of being during unemployment, Linda’s interviewer asked her if there was anything she wanted to say about how she saw her future:

I’m a very strong believer that in ‘everything happens for a reason,’ so if I’m not gettin’ the one position that I think is perfect, that I really like,
there must be somethin’ that I’m supposed to be doin’. And there’s been a
couple of other things that, um, I’d like to do, I mean, I’m cleanin’ up the
house, I’m there for [my youngest daughter], when she really needed me,
so that’s a plus. You know, I couldn’t have been there the whole, if I was
workin’.[…] And she’s growin’ up and so I, just, it’s gonna work out. We
just have to keep pluggin’. You know, I just keep pluggin’ on.

Linda described a feeling and a sense of self that was not uncommon among the
long-term unemployed my colleagues and I interviewed—a feeling that work, in
some form or another, was a fundamental need. And for Linda, like several
others, this desire to work and to work for others extended beyond the immediate
household and family. Linda continued,

I always wanted to do Meals on Wheels, so I might do that. I mean, I
would hate to sign up for somethin’ and then not be able to do it on a long-
term basis, but I might do that because I like it. I don’t know why, I
always wanted to do that. Well, and I think it’s so hard for some of these
people, I mean, if they’re only getting their meals delivered, then they
might just need someone to talk to. And since I’m home alone, by myself,
obviously, as you can tell, I’ll talk your head off. I mean, I’m a talker
anyway, but then, put me at home eight hours by myself? You know,
people—if I’m around someone it’s like, “What are you on?” She laughed.

For Linda, then, the loss of her job was about much more than the loss of money.
She had lost her sense of sociality, her sense of productivity, and she wanted to replace
them through the unpaid work of service to others both in and outside her house. Her interest in unpaid work and paid work were inseparable in her life, just as the results of that labor are rarely separate.

It is this reality of the lived intersection between family and work, the lived continuity rather than separation between the decisions and behaviors and beliefs that concern intimate life and material conditions and needs, that the field of feminist social reproduction has theorized. This messy intersection, feminist social reproduction alleges, is a key terrain on which race, gender, and class inequalities are maintained and reproduced. Social reproduction refers to the everyday activities people perform, either for pay or for free, day in and day out, to sustain themselves and others biologically, emotionally, and socially. It is through this activity that the social relations that make up families and communities, and indeed, the global capitalist economy are reproduced (Benston 1969; Vogel 1983; Gimenez 2005; Brenner and Laslett 2000; Bakker and Gill 2001; Ferguson and McNally 2015a, 2015b). The major disparity between who does the work of social reproduction and who benefits most from it contributes to the overall exploitation of the working class by the capitalist class. But it also contributes the stratification of the working-class itself—the disparities between the comforts of men and women, old and young, gay and straight, disabled and able-bodied, and precarious and stable.

Cindi Katz describes social reproduction as the “fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life” (2001: 710). Feminist political economy seeks to better understand how that “stuff” interacts with, influences, and alters the material realities of inequality.
we observe and attempt to correct. What might be the impact of experiences like Linda’s on her future, on her daughters’ futures, on what working people come to expect of the world around them and how they view their place in it? Longitudinal studies on the impact of financial crisis and unemployment now abound and offer insights into what is most likely to have happened to people like Linda since she spoke about her predicament in 2012. Most have found work, but many of those who have, have replaced middle-wage jobs with low-wage jobs (Global Insight and IHS 2014). Such was Linda’s case even prior to the period of unemployment in which she participated in this study. She had already been on a trajectory of downward mobility and unemployment, losing jobs with healthcare benefits and gaining jobs without them, before she lost work entirely.

However, rather than measuring trends in changes over time, this dissertation examines the more ephemeral snapshots of human life under these conditions and the narratives people tell about their lives as they are living them (and finding them disrupted by crisis), in order to better understand the overlapping, competing, and mutually reinforcing spheres of love and labor, of exploitation and agency, of what it means when the stuff of life becomes messier and even less determinate than it was before.

Income is not the only thing that is lost or changed when a person becomes unemployed in a society where employment makes up a major part of many people’s identities and is often a source from which they take confidence in their importance and capability. For Linda, unemployment and its consequences touched her sense of herself as a partner, as a parent, as a worker, and consequently, as a person of worth. As Cristobal Young (2012) shows in his study of long-term unemployed people immediately
after the Great Recession, getting a new job, even a job as good as the one that was lost, will not quickly undo or resolve many of the emotional and psychological impacts of unemployment. This dissertation charts some of the emotional and ideological externalities of unemployment, especially the unpaid and often unrecognized labor of being unemployed. I show how these externalities contribute to the further stratification of the working-class— in this case, among the not-working ranks of the working-class. I ask: How do these consequences vary based on the experiences and particular gender and race positionalities of individuals? And, how are the differences in these experiences contributing to, creating, or disrupting current structures of economic inequality? In this analysis I turn to scholarship from four main fields of study for my analytical frameworks: social reproduction feminism (SRF), Black feminist thought, feminist family studies, and the sociology of work and housework.

Social Reproduction Feminism
Since the global financial crisis of 2008, there has been a resurgence of interest in the field of feminist social reproduction theory, particularly as a means of exploring the costs of increased pressure on the family sphere to sustain the global political economy (Bakker and Gill 2012, Elson and Pearson 2013, Calkin 2015). What first began as a way to unify the popular dual-systems theories of patriarchy and capitalism, and thus, gender oppression and class inequality, under a common, structural theory, has evolved as a tool for understanding a broader set of inequalities and developments. While the field has long examined the role of the family and unpaid labor in contributing to capitalism in general,
recent scholarship has focused more acutely on a perceived crisis for social reproduction under capitalism associated with neoliberalism. The early social reproduction theories contributed key insights about the relationship between the reproduction of labor and the reproduction of society as a whole, as well as the special role women played in this. However, it simultaneously demonstrated the limits of a strictly class-gender oriented social reproduction theory to fully capture the most salient categories of identity in these processes. The evolution of social reproduction feminism since the 1970s reflects a transition from an age in which the most urgent questions of the field revolved around tweaking and improving a structural theory to account for the particular stratification and exploitation that made capitalism “work.” But what of the differences in social reproductive labor and social standing between, say, Linda, and a woman who was actively employed, between Linda and a woman of color who was experiencing unemployment, or perhaps, between Linda and men with similar backgrounds who were also engaging in unpaid reproductive labor?

By the late 2000s, the field had firmly shifted from a theoretical mediator between Marxism and feminism (Vogel 1983; Hartmann 1979; Benston 1972), and gained more policy and reform-based aspirations, adopting, in turn, ethnographic and demographic methodologies to better explore people’s fluid, lived experiences of production and reproduction. Today, feminists renewing the discussion of social reproduction do so in response to the developments in the global economy over the last forty years: they argue that with fewer and fewer jobs that pay a middle income and offer any benefits, and with welfare retrenchment and austerity taking place throughout the industrialized world at the
same time, the overall economy is much more dependent on unpaid reproductive work that takes place among families and communities than it has been in the past (Luxton 2006; Elson and Pearson 2015; Elson 2014; Bakker and Gill 2001). Though women and people of color have largely always done the labor of childcare and housework in modern capitalism, the economy as a whole is much more reliant on their ability to do much more of this labor and with much less outside support at various moments of crisis than it has been in the past (Luxton and Bezanson 2006; Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2012; Elson 2014). In other words, new SRF not only explores the differences between particular classes of workers and their burdening with social reproduction today, but also shows that Linda’s and others’ contributions to social reproduction without receiving any wages from the market or substantial welfare state support is particularly crucial to the system as it has evolved in recent decades. Furthermore, new SRF theorists argue that without policies that acknowledge and support social reproduction, the sustenance brought through unpaid reproductive labor is under threat of “depletion” and disruption (Elson 2012; Rai 2012; Rai, Hoskyns and Thomas 2014). If the disruption of that sustenance becomes widespread throughout the economy, then what is the future of the larger economic system we have come to recognize as neoliberal capitalism, symptomatized by what Cindi Katz has called “vagabondage,” and what many have noted is a near-universalizing of precarity?

In studying how the relations of social reproduction within global capitalism change over time, social reproduction feminists have also integrated increasingly complex theories of oppression and exploitation into social reproduction theory, which
can be a corrective to the problems of gender-neutral, non-reproductive theories of the precaritization of work. The field of social reproduction theory, however, like others in feminist political economy, has also faced the challenges of demands for more robust intersectional theory, especially a better accounting of the effects of racial difference on processes of social reproduction. The new methods and analyses these demands have produced also shape this dissertation’s focus on racial, gender, and class differences in social reproduction.

Global Racial Inequality and SRF

Himani Bannerji critiqued the erasure of racism from feminist political economy’s analysis of the world in Thinking Through: Essays on Feminism, Marxism, and Anti-Racism. Bannerji argued that a universalizing of white, middle-class women’s experiences characterized much of Marxist-feminist theorizing of inequality, even despite the fact that this theorizing provided concrete evidence of much more specific problems among particular groups and thus belied the limits of such an approach (1995). Bannerji attributes this erasure of racial difference not so much to an endemic race-blindness, but to “either/or relationship of subjectivity and class politics” within the field (22). She contrasted this with a framework that understands that “a concrete organization of class is impossible minus historical, cultural, sexual and political relations” where these relations include the systematic production of racial inequality and give substance to class in everyday life (30-31). Since Bannerji’s widely heard call for more attention to racial inequality in feminist political economy (FPE), social reproduction theorists have
attempted to illustrate that racial inequality is central to the social relations of reproduction, and therefore, a fundamental category of analysis for them.

Meg Luxton contributes to this surge of racial analysis by arguing that FPE has often collapsed race and ethnicity into discussions of either ethnocentrism or class, rather than treating race and racism as structurally significant categories (2006: 13). But she contends that social reproduction theory is well positioned to correct these problems in FPE precisely because of its attunement to “the allocation of responsibility” for reproducing the classes, a task which is clearly not shared equally by women or the working-class as a whole around the world (13). According to Luxton then, this pursuit necessarily put issues of imperialism, racialization, and racism at the heart of gender and class analyses. Capitalist development depended on supplies of (reproduced) labor from people who originally lived outside regions where capitalist relations were dominant and on people in and from colonies; the transnational, trans-regional locus of social reproduction and capital’s mobility mean that capitalist expansion is foundationally racialized and predicated on differences and divisions (38).

Luxton argues that the task of social reproduction theorists should be to account for the significance of race and racial inequality in shaping capitalist relations and reconfigurations, as they shift over time, not only through tracking discourses, policies, and demographic divides, but also by examining the different experiences of reproductive labor these have produced (2006). To account for the significance of racial inequality in
social reproduction, then, I not only note explicitly and implicitly racialized statements participants make, but in both white participants’ accounts of their experiences and the experiences of participants of color, I mark the aspects of their experiences that are likely results of racial inequality over the years.

Susan Ferguson (2008) posits that it is increased attentiveness to spatial analyses of reproductive labor that allows Canadian SRF scholars to integrate a robust accounting of racial inequality into their analyses. As she puts it: “In other words, it’s not just what we do to reproduce society, but where we do it that counts in an imperial capitalist world” (42). This positionality constructs particular experiences of and burdens with social reproduction. For example, to perform reproductive labor at home (for oneself and one’s family members) is a very different experience than performing labor at work (for strangers, and, indirectly, one’s employer). That difference is exponentially greater if work and home are separated by not only towns, but national borders, as is the case for many women of color acting as domestic workers in the Global North and sending money home to care for family members in the Global South. Likewise, to perform reproductive labor at work in a global economic center like New York City, is different than performing that labor on the global economic margins, in post-colonial nations.

Linda’s physical location has major effects on her contributions to social reproduction. For instance, she is physically separated from her adult daughters. To care for them and help to reproduce them, she has only the option to send them what precious financial resources she has passed down from her children (and through the fortune of having parents who accumulated wealth during their working lives, a kind of “luck” that
is largely predicted by racial background, is in a position to send this help). Yet, she is also fortunate through her relationship with her boyfriend and his stable employment, to continue to share a home with him and her youngest daughter, both of whom she can care for easily and provide with a clean house and good meals while she is unemployed.

Linda’s location in a working-class neighborhood near the center of the city both constrains and creates opportunities for her, and shapes the potential outlets for her social reproductive labor. Around her, she sees poor individuals in need of care, who are not receiving sufficient care either from a private, hired source, like an at-home nurse, nor from family members who could take them into their homes or take care of them full-time. She also sees a potential for a unique kind of fulfillment in helping people for whom she has no familial responsibility, since her local family at least can be taken care of rather sufficiently and give her time to spare, which would not be afforded someone who was performing a commensurate service for an aging family member. Her class, gender, racial, and spatial existence position her to desire a service opportunity, to see particular kinds of needs among particular people that she might reasonably be able to fulfill, and yet, at least for the moment, have also denied her an opportunity to work for pay, instead of having to seek the kinds of acknowledgement she misses in unpaid service.

While work by Cindi Katz (2001, 2004), Susan Ferguson (2008), and Susan Ferguson and David McNally (2015a) has greatly expanded the analysis of global-racial inequality in the social reproductive framework over the past decade, these analyses only begin to scratch the surface of the multitude of ways in which racial identities and
histories of racialization effect the performance of reproductive labor in everyday life, or the centrality of the category of race to the perpetuation of social reproductive inequalities within the United States. The geographic intervention in social reproduction feminism highlights how global, national, and even local inequalities shape social reproductive inequalities, overburdening the same people hurt most by neocolonialism and neoliberalism (mostly women of color in and from the global South, as the previous authors have shown) with the social reproductive labor that benefits those with the most access to capital in the global North and at home.

Further exploring the difference between those who perform this labor at work and those who perform it at home in the U.S., Mignon Duffy shows how the rise of the service sector and the very existence of more and more paid reproductive labor jobs have increasingly racialized reproductive labor within the United States (2007), and that an excessive focus by scholars on unpaid reproductive labor, rather than paid labor, elides these racial inequalities (2005). These tools help to establish the role of racism in what Ferguson calls the objective conditions or relations of social reproduction, the concentration of this labor among particular people and with benefits that are dispersed to particular groups of people through the generations and not to others.²

² By “objective conditions of social reproductive relations,” Ferguson does not mean a structural and anonymous description of how the labor takes place and serves capital, as the term is often used among traditional Marxist political economists (2008: 48). Ferguson’s notion of the objective conditions consists of the sum of the relations between individual people, places, and activities, who, in isolation, account for the subjective experience of life. This is an important contrast with the structuralist-Marxist approaches to SRF of the 1970s and 1980s, which conceived of the objective conditions primarily as the means and mode of production, which structured all other institutions and relations, all of which were conceived of as subjective in contrast to the means and relations of production. Ferguson’s distinction between objective and subjective processes troubles the framing of gender or race as secondary or simply subjective effects of
What combination of objective and subjective raced, classed, and gendered factors, for instance, caused Linda to consider taking on unpaid service work to seek fulfillment while she was unemployed, but had not yet pushed her to look for a paid, service-industry job as a replacement for her lost clerical job? What do Linda’s experience and her understanding of unpaid work and the place of service in it do to reproduce the notion of reproductive labor as a selfless, social good that ultimately rewards both the performer and the receiver? And how might the circulation of such an idea contradict, obfuscate, and help to reproduce the inequalities associated with the experiences of poor women, women of color, and others who do service work for pay? Capturing “the interplay of subjective and objective processes” (Ferguson 2008: 48) of social reproduction requires integrating an analysis of racism into SRF more fully, so that it shifts from being the third-wheel of a gender-and-class unifying theory, and becomes instead a category at the center of it. Racial inequality is not just a part of the subjective experience of social reproduction, while gender and class make up its objective conditions, but is at the core of social reproduction and the experience of reproductive labor in the United States.

Black Feminist Thought

This reality of the centrality of racial inequality to reproductive labor is clear not only from the analyses of U.S. reliance of immigration and migrant labor provided by Ferguson and McNally (2015a), but also from the rich history of critical race studies and the relations themselves. In fact, these social divisions construct, justify, and reproduce the very relations Marxists describe as essential to the capitalist mode of production.
especially black feminist thought, which show the long history of black Americans’ exploited labor in the care and domestic labor industries, as well as their exclusion from all of the nation’s most important welfare and wealth-building projects. Throughout this dissertation, race, along with the categories of class and gender, figures as both a result and a cause of social reproductive inequality, and is inextricably linked to class and gender through their mutual constitution. Analyzing my data through this triple-lens reveals that this additional complexity does not further fragment an understanding of the role of social reproduction or the impact of class, gender, and racial inequalities within it, as many fear will result from the addition of more categories, but instead shows that at the intersections of these complex categories is an increasingly polarized neoliberal reality.

This method of analyzing through an intersectional lens that accounts for race, gender, and class, at a minimum, is one of the major contributions of Black feminist thought. While Kimberle Crenshaw’s labeled this multiple-modes-of-analysis methodology as “intersectionality,” it is a framework that had been developed by countless Black feminist activists and theorists before her. In particular, this dissertation takes inspiration from the methodologies modeled by Angela Davis in her groundbreaking history of movements to challenge inequality in the United States, *Women, Race, and Class* (1981). A Marxist and organized Communist during the turbulent struggles of the women’s movement and the Black Power movement, Davis provides an analysis of U.S. history, which centers the structural and social importance of
the violent turbulence of global capitalism, while also centering the experiences of people of color and women in the telling of the struggles that system has wrought.

The analysis of Black women’s experiences in this dissertation are particularly informed by the methodologies and frameworks of analysis Patricia Hill Collins first described in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) and has further elaborated upon throughout her career. Beyond the similarities of this dissertation’s methodology with Collins’s articulation of a Black feminist epistemological investment in uncovering the subjugated knowledge of marginalized people, especially Black women, whose experience is so central to understanding the historic dynamics of inequality in the United States, I borrow from Collins’s particular articulation of the factors and use them within a study of social reproduction. Collins identifies the importance of key, “controlling images” that define and shape the experiences of and perceptions of black women in the United States. Each one of these major controlling images Collins highlights, the mammy, the matriarch, and the jezebel, capture the intersection of black women’s family and work lives, and their social reproductive and sexual lives, in their own limiting and oppressive ways. Beyond references to these particular controlling images in my analysis of some of the Black women’s stories highlighted in this dissertation, I use Collins’s concept of the “controlling image” to compare the experiences of participants from other backgrounds as well.

Importantly, this includes an analysis of the cultural meaning of unemployment and unpaid labor for women who are not as directly affected and defined by these images of black women, including white women from across the socioeconomic spectrum. For
instance, how does Linda’s freedom from the controlling images Black women experience create certain possibilities for happiness and self-fulfillment for her even during unemployment, or lead her to reproduce ideas of social reproduction that harm women subjected to the controlling images? Furthermore, there are controlling images beyond those detailed by Collins that are salient to reproductive labor in the austerity age. For instance, in future chapters, I turn to the models of postfeminist success, or “can-do” girls and women, detailed by scholars like Angela McRobbie and Anita Harris (2004) in order to understand the gendered housework behaviors and attitudes of women who have been given more cultural currency, and who either nonetheless object to their lot in unpaid labor during unemployment or are able to utilize postfeminist discourses to their advantage to make sense of and feel good about this labor.

Feminist Family and Kinship Studies

While SRF and Black feminist thought have centered the institution of the family in considering women’s and men’s divergent economic positions across race and class, the interdisciplinary field I have labeled as feminist family and kinship studies rightly problematizes just what it is that constitutes “the family.” Questioning the meaning of this term is especially important when one is attempting to understand difference and inequality, rather than assuming sameness, is the purpose of a given analysis. Important contributions to this project have come from anthropologists, sociologists, and historians, and they have collectively resulted in the broad use of the term, “family,” in this dissertation.
Judith Stacey’s (1998) articulation of the difference between “the family” as an ideal, cultural-type, and actually existing families is one important guide for the analysis of this dissertation. On the one hand, I will consider the cultural weight and salience of ideal-type families for various participants, especially when they refer to anxieties about their own ability to live up to these ideals. At the same time, I also respect that participants themselves push against these ideal-types in the very ways they define and describe their own families and family members. Who belongs to the family, and particularly the necessity of moving beyond blood relations alone as the barometer of belonging is a long legacy of social movements and of critical kinship studies (Schneider 1984; Weston 1991, 2001; Yanagisako and Collier 2004). Historians Stephanie Coontz (1988, 2002) and Nancy Cott (2002) rather thoroughly charted the evolution of meaning surrounding marriage and the family within the United States, and particularly its relationship to changing material conditions. This perspective is especially important to keep in mind in this study, where the sample is limited by its lack of sexual diversity.

While the study did not include any participants who openly identified themselves as gay, lesbian, queer, or bisexual, these participants do describe an array of family arrangements that go beyond the scope of the nuclear-family model, including opposite-sex partners with whom they do or do not live, but also roommates, friends, parents, siblings, and sometimes grandchildren. Linda’s family might be defined in several different ways, and attuning to her non-nuclear household arrangement with her boyfriend and youngest daughter, as one version of her family, but also to her ongoing care for her daughters who live on their own because they are family despite their distance, reveals the power of
family and familialism in setting the expectations for caregiving and support, even when “the family,” has been redefined and challenged. She not only feels pressure to care for them because they’re her family, broadly defined, even when her own resources are scarce, but also feels a unique satisfaction in taking care of them and sacrificing herself for them.

Sociology of Work and Housework

While sociology as a discipline has often segregated the study of paid work from the study of unpaid housework, the two fields have produced invaluable tools for the study of unpaid labor in the context of unemployment. First, at a fundamental level, these fields have for decades measured and provided evidence of the assumptions that form the basis of SRF and the feminist movement more broadly: that there are indeed vastly unequal distributions of labor and rewards for that labor, and that the particular contours of these divisions of labor are not fixed quantities throughout the history of capitalism, but change in ways both large and small over time. Bianchi et al (2000; 2012) and England (2010) show most convincingly the most recent historic trend in the gendered division of household labor, in which rapid movement toward greater parity between men and women took place between the 1970s and today, only to slow and taper off in the 1990s through today.

Second, the sociology of work and housework has provided the basis for this dissertation’s biggest intervention in SRF, namely, through its break with SRF’s almost-ubiquitous view of unpaid household labor as a disutility, and its exploration of a
plurality of meanings that different kinds of work can hold. Steve Lopez and I have elsewhere described the most constant assumption within the sociology of housework literature as the disutility fallacy— that housework is always-automatically assumed to be something participants experience negatively, that they feel it as a burden on them, but which they do anyway, either because of social pressures or because they feel the work must be done and will not be done by anyone else (Swenson and Lopez 2016). We’ve used the insights of a sociologist of paid work, John Budd, as a framework for exploring the non-disutility meanings of unpaid work (2011). Along with work as a disutility, Budd describes nine other major meanings identified with work, including work as personal fulfillment, work as social relation, and work as identity (2011). We grounded the identification of our own categories of meaning of housework in participants’ actual discussions of it, and the unique political economic context of the study. Linda alone expressed all three of the most prominent, non-disutility meanings of unpaid work Lopez and I identified in this sample: housework as a relational obligation, which one does to bolster those relationships, housework as a “silver lining,” or an opportunity to invest in the self and others during unemployment, and housework as a way to feel busy and useful and to build the self and reinforce a particular, desired version of selfhood.

Within the particular field of feminist social reproduction theory, this disutility assumption about housework and even other forms of unpaid labor like child and elder care is often implicit. It has a political character, in that it points out that the performance of this labor allows exploitative systems and an ever-less supportive state to continue mostly as they are, despite their dysfunctions and failures to live up to some of their most
basic promises. In this sense, the notion of unpaid reproductive labor as a disutility is supported by empirical evidence and a firm structural theory of the neoliberal economy, but it remains a fallacy in this context nonetheless, as it maps this negative structural role into discussions of individuals’ use of the time and often their experiences with it, and it neglects that far from experiencing this labor as exploitation, participants themselves may have an interest in continuing to perform it, regardless of whether other people or the system as a whole benefits from it as well. The bulk of discussion about social reproduction in the recent economic crisis has re-emphasized the disutility notion of housework by focusing on the potential of an ever-increasing private burden for reproductive labor to deplete women workers (Elson 2012; Rai 2012; Rai et al 2014). And as SRF rings the alarms about the impending crises that will result from an overreliance on privatized social reproduction, understanding why it is that particular individuals continue to take part in and contribute to a system that seems broken in so many ways is all-the-more important to understanding what can be done to change the current order, and particularly to create the political will to do so.

Most importantly, these fields have provided empirical evidence that the nuances of meaning and ideology these forms of work and gender itself hold for participants matter to their individual experiences and actual practices of labor (Kroska 2003; Altschuler 2004; Warren 2014). The recent empirical evidence that the reverse is also true, that the practice of particular forms of labor can and does change ideologies about gender and housework (Carlson and Lynch 2013), also figures heavily into this dissertation’s claims that a close content analysis of how people think and feel and talk
about their experiences matters to outcomes at the individual, family, and eventually aggregate levels. In other words, what Linda does and how she thinks about what she does are closely linked. If important developments in thinking about unpaid work, gender, and value, are occurring at an individual level for people like Linda, her experience and the thousands similar to or different from it will matter to the larger division of unpaid labor, not just along gender lines, but, as the previous sections have highlighted, by race as well as class.

Reproducing Inequality in the Age of Austerity

It is the particular combination of these different traditions of scholarship and the unique circumstances of prolonged individual crisis that I use to examine the unequal division of unpaid labor, and the unequal experience of that labor, as inequality-producing phenomena. I center the experiences of individuals facing economic crisis to sharpen feminist critique of the function of reproductive labor, with a better sense that some individuals actually take pleasure in and receive benefits from their unpaid participation in this work. However, I also wish to avoid the too-easy movement from individual experience to structural effect, and instead marinate in the messiness of changes, small and large, taking place within a structure that appears to remain intact and functional. Studying individuals’ different experiences in depth has value on its own, without always being connected back to structural patterns. These various meanings drawn from individuals’ experiences show not only that these inequalities are outcomes of social reproductive processes, but that they are responsible, in turn, for reproducing and
reinforcing those inequalities. This labor becomes a part of generational social climbing and security for some, and an enormous burden that illustrates the impossibility of that security and mobility for others.

Rather than starting with the assumption that the story of social reproduction in the U.S. has either ruptured on a grand scale or that it has remained constant over time, I study the experiences of individuals whose lives and whose relationships to reproduction are in flux, and posit that a major source of change in the aftermath of the recession has been the increasingly normalized, yet still stigmatized experience of long-term unemployment. As Joan Wallach Scott argued of historical scholarship, “The point... is to disrupt the notion of fixity, to discover the nature of the debate or repression that leads to the appearance of timeless permanence” (1999: 43). While there has been ample discussion of the macro-level dynamics in social reproduction produced by over four decades of neoliberal policies and ideologies, these are trends that require closer analysis at a time of pronounced crisis, especially since these trends are themselves productive of new kinds of thinking, ways of being, and modes of inequality. In this analysis of the reproductive labor of the long-term unemployed, I hope to show that the unemployed are an increasingly significant class in the overall reproduction of today’s social relations, whose own contributions to social reproductive labor are numerous and significant, and whose unequal experiences of that labor reproduce social inequality, much as the stratified productive sphere does.
Chapter 2: “Not Working” in a Hard-Working City

The phrase vagabond capitalism puts the vagrancy and dereliction where it belongs—on capitalism, that unsettled, dissolute, irresponsible stalker of the world. It also suggests a threat at the heart of capitalism’s vagrancy: that an increasingly global capitalist production can shuck many of its particular commitments to place, most centrally those associated with social reproduction, which is almost always less mobile than production. At worst, this disengagement hurls certain people into forms of vagabondage; at best, it leaves people in all parts of the world struggling to secure the material goods and social practices associated with social reproduction.

--Cindi Katz (2001: 709-710)

Though Columbus is the capital city of the midwestern state of Ohio, it has only recently enjoyed recognition as one of the more prosperous and desirable cities to live in within the state of Ohio. Located at the state’s geographic center, Columbus has in recent decades experienced both population and economic growth, in a region of the United States where both have been relatively scarce. The northern cities of Cleveland, Toledo, Akron, and even Youngstown, as well as Cincinnati to its south, enjoyed national notoriety first for their industrial fortitude and then for their rapid declines in the face of deindustrialization. Columbus is located inside the geographic region of the United States often called the rust belt, but it was never a real rust-belt city. In recent decades, however, Columbus has sought to assert itself as a major and prosperous national city, built on both the strong work-ethics of its people and the attractiveness and modernity of its policies and institutions to those who would employ them. Columbus’ rise among Ohio cities is
due both to the relative decline of neighboring cities and a fairly aggressive competition to attract employers and business owners to move to the city. As Patricia Burgess (1994) writes in a detailed history of Columbus’s development:

As the national economy began its transformation from one based on manufacturing and heavy industry to one based on commerce and service industries, Columbus could capitalize on change. Though there were some factories, manufacturing had never been the city’s economic mainstay. Columbus was a center of government and, owing to the university and those facilities attracted by it, a center of research as well. It was also home to several national finance and insurance companies, and in 1970 the Borden Company began moving its national headquarters from New York City to Columbus. Others soon followed suit. Rather than sharing the hardships and economic dislocations of its rustbelt neighbors, Columbus was a green oasis of economic development—a postindustrial city (14).

While Columbus’s housing of the state government infrastructure and the state’s largest public university (Ohio State University) certainly helped the city attract these businesses, there was much more than happenstance involved in Columbus’s changing reputation. The city also aggressively courted investors and corporations to the city with tax incentives and even sometimes direct cash payments or interest-free loans.

Today, the city boasts a generous set of tax incentives and financial rewards to businesses who choose to move to Columbus, especially if they move to particular neighborhoods in Columbus, including the Downtown area and certain under-developed
neighborhoods, such as Franklinton, and the historically black neighborhood on the Near East Side, the King-Lincoln District. At the same time, the state-funded Enterprise Zone Program pulls businesses from these same urban, high-unemployment neighborhoods, to surrounding suburban areas. According to the progressive think tank Progress Ohio, this has the effect of merely rewarding businesses for moving from one blighted area to another in the same surrounding metropolitan area, without sustained benefits from these moves actually rewarding the people residing in the most blighted neighborhoods (Siegel 2013).

Despite the recent economic crisis, it became clear that Columbus had become competitive with these other cities and achieved its status as a lasting postindustrial force, and it appeared likely that it would overtake these others in its centrality to Ohio’s overall economy. A 2014 news report in the Columbus Dispatch credits much of this success to the leadership and work of Columbus’s (now retired) Mayor for sixteen years, Michael B. Coleman. As the Dispatch reports, “Mayor [Michael B.] Coleman has presided over a strong economic recovery in Columbus that has reverberated throughout the state. Mayor Coleman has leveraged incentives to create more than 40,000 jobs and bring $7 billion in private investment to Columbus throughout his tenure.” Furthermore, recent reports have noted that Columbus is on pace to surpass both Cincinnati and Cleveland in economic production over the next decades (Williams 2014). Since the end of the economic recession in 2010, Columbus’ unemployment rates have been consistently below national and Ohio averages, and have hovered around three and four points lower than those in Cleveland. These trends over the last forty years have gained Columbus a reputation as a
city that not only offers prosperity and opportunities, but also one that does so by both breeding and rewarding hard work.³

It is in this context of booming headlines touting triumphant economic recovery and even progress and competitive advancement on the part of the city of Columbus that this study of long-term unemployed workers took place. The unemployed participants in this study, whatever their particular circumstances, access, and outlooks, face the ideological and material pressures created by living in or near a city that has been publicly lauded for its success and which, as I will show, simultaneously creates an almost constant ebb and flow of employers in, around, and back out of the city, employers which, by and large, hire for low-paying, benefit-less, and insecure jobs. To understand what kinds of ideas, outlooks, relationships, and behaviors such an existence produces is critical to understanding the social that is produced and reproduced under these economic conditions.

These unemployed workers therefore represent an increasingly more normalized and seemingly permanent fixture of workers in U.S. cities that have adopted or will adopt these tactics. I take seriously the complexity and differences in this subset of workers because they are a key product of urban vagabond capitalism. The differences between these workers, from their location in the city, to their suitability to this ever-shifting

³ As an example of this evolving reputation, the city’s Major League Soccer team was named the Columbus Crew when they joined the league in 1996 in honor of Columbus’s reputation as a city of hard-working, blue-collar people (Major League Soccer “Columbus Crew SC History”). The logo for the team was, until recently, silhouettes of three men wearing construction hats. It has since been replaced by what the team’s owners hope is a more modern image, a sleek logo with just the year of the team’s founding in a circular crest. While the workman-like qualities of the city remain represented in the team’s name, perhaps the association with blue-collar work in the construction workers, in particular, seems less descriptive of the city today.
economic landscape, and the resources their families and other personal networks make available to them as they seek employment, have a great influence on workers’ engagement in social reproductive labor and the impact that has on them. Unemployed workers’ commitment to performing unpaid work even as they search desperately for paid work is tied directly to the tumultuous local economy they navigate paired with the messages they have long received about the opportunities they should be finding and the work they should be performing.

Vagabond capitalism in a U.S. city

The most widely cited and pernicious examples of what Katz refers to as vagabond capitalism (2001), or the ability of capital and its attendant resources to move from place to place without investing in the well-being or reproduction of the people who made wealth accumulation possible in those places, revolve around the insecurities created by national borders that are often porous for capital but not nearly so for people. But the geographic delinking of production from social reproduction Katz describes also occurs at more local levels, not just as capital moves from nation to nation, but from city to city, and even neighborhood to neighborhood. Policies that create never-ending competition between particular locales to bring businesses and jobs create a constant, shifting class of jobless individuals who in many ways are thought to be the very people who will be helped by these policies for job creation. These policies not only create the six to seven percent of unemployed workers that seem to exist long-term in most American cities, but in fact, these policies would not be profitable if it were not for the existence of this large
class of workers who is at the ready to take the often low-wage jobs that are “created” by the arrival of city-hopping companies.

Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore describe a general trend of the decreasing relevance of the nation-state to everyday life for the majority of those living in a particular area and its substitution by local politics, policies, and relations. They call this the “emergence of the local,” and argue that scholars and policy makers must view this shift through the lens of neoliberalism, which they define as “the loosening or dismantling of various institutional constraints upon marketization, commodification, the hyperexploitation of workers, and the discretionary power of private capital” (vi). At the local level, as I will show through the case of Columbus, vagabond capitalism plays out as a race-to-the-bottom of public infrastructure, corporate tax rates, and labor regulations, among cities that on many other issues might find it to their benefit to cooperate rather than compete. Under the logic of this competition, the best cities are those that make themselves most accommodating to the whims of capital, and in turn, the least hospitable and most unpredictable for workers. This vagabondage plays out between cities, as they compete to host and house employers and businesses, and businesses, as a result, move about from place to place and cities vie for their presence.

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4 Brenner and Theodore note that there are absolute limitations on the concept of the “New Localism,” and argue that it has not erased the role of the nation-state in financial policy or in policing citizenship and borders (2002). In fact, they note that the new roles taken up by city governance have, in fact, been justified precisely because of the overwhelming power of “supralocal” transformations, like globalization and financialization (2002: 341-2).
Of late, Columbus has been in a relatively strong position to bargain for the attention of employers, and it has done so through the revitalization of itself neighborhood by neighborhood. For example, John Tierney of *The Atlantic* writes glowingly of the Coleman-led project to revitalize Franklinton, a neighborhood west of Downtown Columbus abandoned over the last thirty years by more than 25 percent of its residents, due to flooding caused by the adjacent Scioto River and attendant bad reputation:

In other words, this is a city that works. There are powerful business leaders and public officials in Columbus (and I mean “big-city” powerful), but the city is small enough that they all know each other and are able to work well together and make things happen. The particular story I want to tell here [...] is how, through the attention of a strong mayor, public-private partnerships, and the determination of a lot of people, Columbus is making progress toward resuscitating its poorest, most blighted neighborhood (2014).

The evidence Tierney cites of resuscitation are young entrepreneurial, and mostly white individuals who have moved their businesses into abandoned Franklinton factories, including a rental space for artists, the Columbus Idea Foundry, and a pair of new microbreweries. These businesses arrived to resuscitate Franklinton as a result of a deliberate plan and massive injection of public resources by city officials, including the creation of a new foundation called the Franklinton Development Association (Tierney 2014).
Though the businesses this plan had attracted were small compared to some of Columbus’ most profitable business-residents, it was their creative, young, and DIY-vibes that had given these race-to-the-bottom policies their progressive and even philanthropic veneer, attracting not only support from the local population of Columbus who now saw Franklinton as a viable neighborhood to spend time in, but from the national readership of *The Atlantic*. Columbus officials, with their small-business partners, had achieved what CEO of the Franklinton Development Association Jim Sweeney called “gentrification—without the negatives” (“Gentrification without the negatives” 2014). The Franklinton story was not about gentrification through displacement, Sweeney explained (the river flooding had already achieved that years ago), but through attracting artists and artisans from other cities to come to Columbus to rent space and sell their work. In other words, Columbus had successfully poached talent and capital from other places, rather than pushing out residents from its own neighborhoods. This presentation of a gentrification strategy that comes without negatives ignores two other important questions: namely, what happens to the areas these artists and others are leaving, and what happens to the poor residents who had not been pushed out by flooding or by development, as the price of living in the neighborhoods rises, even while there are not necessarily new jobs arriving?

Columbus has also been on the losing end of this trans-urban competition over capital at times. In 2011, the Southern-cuisine restaurant chain Bob Evans announced that it would be moving its corporate headquarters from the South Side of Columbus for nearby suburb New Albany, Ohio. To win the bid for Bob Evans’ presence, New Albany
provided an incentive package that New Albany officials claimed was worth 9.8 million in savings, including a 15-year, 100 percent property tax abatement, a $1 million interest-free loan from the community’s development fund, and a five-year, 20-percent income-tax credit if the city were to operate with environmentally friendly practices at the site (Wince 2011). While New Albany’s taxpayers footed the bill for the Bob Evans move and for much of these incentives, the benefits to the residents themselves was less clear, especially since most of the 400 or so employees at the Columbus corporate office were expected to commute to New Albany, rather than be replaced. Bob Evans left behind a massive, unused office space, which remained vacant for over two years, which residents of the neighborhood soon began to complain about. Mayor Coleman blamed Bob Evans for leaving the city in the first place and accused them of letting down the community by doing so (Office of Mayor Michael B. Coleman 2014).

In 2015 the corporation the two cities had fought over announced it would be selling its new headquarters and leasing a portion of it from its new owners, as well as closing 17 restaurant locations throughout the country and two frozen-food factories. Stockholders blamed the company’s bad financial predicament on a spend-happy CEO’s over-use of a private jet and lavish spending on the New-Albany headquarters; he subsequently resigned (Columbus Dispatch 2015). Bob Evans never made the total number of employees across the country who lost their jobs in this downsizing public.

The distribution of workers who are most victimized by vagabond capitalism like this is, of course, are uneven across the city and around the city. These inequalities impact biological and well as social reproduction. A study in 2013 named Columbus as
one of the top five most economically segregated metropolitan areas in the country. In
Columbus, infant mortality has been particularly high for a city alleged to be booming
and full of opportunities, but those outcomes are no more evenly spread throughout the
city than the wealth and job opportunities Columbus has touted. The concentration of
high infant-mortality rates in the poor and mostly black neighborhoods of South Linden
and the Near East Side (Crane 2014) reflect the gross economic inequities between these
neighborhoods and other parts of the city, especially the parts of the city that have been
deemed as recovered and even nationally renowned for their economic makeovers, such
as the whiter and more affluent German Village, Short North, and more recently,
Franklinton.

It is in ever-shifting and contingent employment context that the study of
unemployed workers in the Greater Columbus area took place between 2012 and 2013,
three and four years after the worst of the global economic recession had technically
ended. Adding to the global and national fact that the worst of the economic environment
had been declared to be over was Columbus’ own relative economic success within that
landscape. For workers across the income and occupational strata in this study then, the
acute awareness of themselves as potentially failed people in a system that is supposed to
be working to provide them opportunity was nearly universal. But as I will show below,
differences across these workers and their subsequently different experiences of
unemployment and job seeking give different meanings and power to these anxieties,
making just what kinds of non-working workers they produce a complex question.
Unemployed in a “city that works”

My colleagues and I met the vast majority of interview participants in our study at one of two job fairs held regularly each month in the Columbus area. One of these job fairs took place on the campus of Ohio State University, one of the largest public universities in the country. The job fair was open only to Ohio State alumni and students, and required pre-registration to attend. The second, more open job fair, took place at the local meetinghouse of the Shriners society, the Aladdin Shrine Temple in the Easton neighborhood. The businesses present at the Ohio State job fair tended to be more white-collar than at the Shriners location, and as would be expected, seemed to attract a more educated base of job seekers. Ohio State alumni seeking jobs traveled from outside Columbus, from cities up to two or three hours away, to attend the fair at their university, with the hopes that their connections and their credentials might lead to a job opportunity they were unable to find from their hometowns. The employers present also ranged from employers located in Columbus to employers located throughout the state and a few from outside it.

At the Shriners location, the employers were much more locally based in and near Columbus, ranging from a few odd technology companies to grocery story chains and insurance companies, as well as U.S. military recruiters. A favorite booth among many job seekers at the Shriners location was the grocery store Aldi, which had a reputation of paying well, providing benefits, and creating a generally respectful work environment for workers who were accustomed to much less in retail and service employment. The attendees at this fair were also more locally based, though for nearly everyone, there was
a drive involved in attending, due to the geographically marginal location of the neighborhood where it took place. Job seekers who lived within city limits without access to a car were likely to have significant difficulty attending. While many participants interviewed explained that they would be open to relocating far from Columbus if an employment opportunity arose, by coming to Columbus for job, housing, and food opportunities, they signal a reliance on the Columbus economy for most of their job prospects. This is a reality lost on those who tout the winning of a business from one neighborhood to another, or one town within Franklin County into Columbus, seem to miss.

Each location represented a powerhouse institution in the narrative of a growing and triumphant Columbus economy. The university, which boasts one of the largest alumni bases in the world and is the fourth largest employer in the state of Ohio, has long been credited as one of the reasons for Columbus’s relative economic success in attracting investors and businesses. Many job seekers attended these job fairs in the hopes that a connection to the university, their aligning themselves with such a force for economic and intellectual innovation, would be their ticket to better employment.

The Aladdin Shrine Temple sat on the outer edge of a neighborhood that did not exist before billionaire and Columbus native Leslie Wexner (founder of The Limited Brands, Inc.) opened the Easton Town Center Mall on the far northeastern edge of Columbus in 1999. At the time of our site visits in 2012 and 2013, the Shriners were in the process of negotiating a deal to sell the space to the Easton Town Center Mall development corporation, allowing them to complete the expansion of retail locations.
from the mall all the way to the I-270 interstate on the outskirts of the neighborhood once and for all. As the long-time, last holdout to the mall’s development of the surrounding area, the sale of the Temple represented one of the last great feats of expansion for the Easton project, and the completion of a major symbol of Columbus’s status as a postindustrial/retail-based city. On the very grounds where we stood discussing bleak job outlooks and how to survive a precarious economy, the final steps were being taken to expand the retail and service economy of Columbus even further, to create a few more jobs, most of them sure to be low-paying and insecure.

Inside the fairs, the outlooks and prospects for most job seekers we spoke to were far less positive. As an icebreaker question for screening participants, we would often ask individuals who approached the water and snack tables in the back of the room whether they had any luck thus far at the fair, or any promising prospects. The most cynical or grim–feeling might laugh out loud at the question. For some, job fairs were a necessary but futile exercise. They couldn’t afford not to try them, but knew the odds of finding something there were slim. One woman told me she went so she could say she had tried, but she knew most employers were using online applications these days. Others would point to one or two booths with employers they had been excited to speak to, but explain that they were disappointed to find the process led only to their filling out an anonymous-seeming application and handing over a copy of their resume to the person at the booth. They had low expectations for what might come of their hour or two spent at the fairs. Only one of the participants I recruited at a job fair and eventually interviewed reported receiving an offer for a job interview from an application he had filled out at a job fair.
Still, many said the process was more about getting out of the house, polishing one’s resume, and practicing the nerve-racking skill of talking to potential employers about one’s interests and qualifications. While some job-fair goers we encountered had taken the time to attend on their lunch breaks or between shifts at jobs where they were unhappy, under-paid, or worried about job security, most were unemployed. For those out of work entirely, the job fair was one of the most structured and reliable events they were able to attend in the course of their weeks, and many reported looking forward to it every month when it took place, even if its direct rewards were scant.

Indeed, for many, attending a job fair was itself an act of unpaid self-reproduction: by preparing for the fair, attending the fair, and following up afterward, they reproduced themselves as working people, despite the fact that they were, at present, not-working people. Attending the job fair represented an opportunity to perform as their professional selves; some found this was a valuable performance in the larger job of job-seeking. Still, many worried they might become “rusty,” and lose their knack for networking and relating to other professionals, because they were spending too much time at home and away from a business environment. Even the ability to talk about their skills and professional viewpoints was a work skill they needed time and space to practice. Attending the job fair was about “putting themselves out there,” which was important even if it didn’t lead directly to a job interview or offer.

These snack-table conversations were the first of many moments in which the unemployed and under-employed workers of this study expressed anxiety about maintaining their identities as working or professional people. And it was not just the job-
fair recruited participants, or those most likely to seek face-to-face meeting opportunities with employers, who were worried about this. Participants recruited at other locations, such as community festivals, a housing resource fair, food pantries, and through snowball connections with researchers and other participants, also discussed this anxiety about losing a sense of themselves as workers as their unemployment periods stretched on. On the one hand, their concerns were practical: not getting to perform the role of worker was bad for job prospects. If you forgot how to do it well, your odds of finding a job were going to decline over time. Daniel, a 31-year old black man who was laid off as a dispatcher from the city electricity plant, explained that the longer he was unemployed, the harder it got for him to avoid looking as though he was a person who did not want to work, even as he was actively seeking work.

[One] of the things that does affect [your ability to find a job] is when you’re out of work they look at you like […] ‘Oh, you been outta work for five/six months…’ It just looks bad when you’re out of work. They assume that you’re lazy.

But beyond this material consequence of being seen as a non-worker, this was also an anxiety about how the general public and also their more intimate acquaintances viewed them as people. The loss of a job and the inability to find another one were not just bad for one’s finances, but potentially for one’s reputation and self-esteem.

In the neoliberal U.S. economic environment, there is perhaps no greater sin than laziness, or a perceived lack of interest in working for oneself and one’s family’s survival. Often, in seemingly off-topic ways, participants would feel compelled to explain
how not-lazy, and how interested in working they were, despite their joblessness. These were often participants who only recently might have been seen as the cornerstone of the middle class, and certainly saw themselves that way too.

To reiterate this, many participants listed the many jobs, many of them low paying and thankless, which they had done reliably since they were young, and with energy and enthusiasm. Jordan, a black woman, aged 55, downsized from a company where she worked in sales, now works in a nursing home. Her movement from a gender-integrated, white-collar job to a job in the care sector, a more traditionally feminine, service-sector job, is exactly the kind of downward mobility that characterizes the precarity of the once-middle-class today. Jordan assured her interviewer that her underemployment was not a sign of pride or laziness, but rather, all she could get at the time:

I don’t care what job I do, I’m gonna give it a hundred and ten percent. I don’t care if I’m cleaning toilets, and I’ve done it, I’ve been a janitor too. Because well, I’ve always worked. In high school, you know, you have these programs you work in the summer. But I’ve always had a job, you know, and I’ve worked as a front desk clerk, I was an operator, I was a reservationist. Um, I’ve done all of that, and I – whatever I’ve done, I’ve done at a hundred and ten percent.

When Emma, a black woman in her 50s tried to explain her surprise at being let go, her lack of laziness, her drive, was one of the first things she referenced as evidence
she should still have a job. “We weren’t lazy people; we’re hardworking people. We were--some of us felt like we were punished unfairly.”

But even as other participants made gestures to show the interviewer that they shouldn’t be cast in with the lazy poor or the bad poor, and to emphasize their work and interest in performing work, they were also able to point out cracks in the same framework. They were willing to work, but, as they continued to note, nobody was willing to let them work, and if they were, it was work that didn’t pay enough to actually solve their growing financial problems.

Edna, a 56-year-old black woman discussed what happened to her after she lost her job, when her boyfriend, a freelance graphic artist, also went bust, as she put it.

We went and moved July 8th, in July 2008. In June 2009 the house we moved into was foreclosed. Now, it’s June 2010 and he has no money and I’m busted. And I’m really, really, really depressed. And you start thinking that you’re not worth anything, that you’re…it’s horrible. It’s like, then you start thinking, ‘I can’t do anything.’ You know?

But the doubt did not stop with Edna herself. Soon, even her family began to question her interest in and ability to work and support herself:

And I’ll tell you what was really hard, was listening to family. They just couldn’t believe I didn’t have a job. And they, you know, ‘Well, you’re lazy. You don’t want to do this.’ It was to the point – this is the honest to god truth – I applied for a job at Burger King and the woman said – she was the manager-- that she didn’t have anything.
Edna was frustrated that her family could not see the disconnect between her desires and efforts and the opportunities that existed for her to seize. As evidence of her willingness to work, she cited the effort to find work at Burger King, an implicitly difficult, low-paying job for which she was surely over-qualified, but would be willing to work at anyway just to work. But even Burger King had no place for her to reclaim her identity as a working person. Edna’s position in the precarious job market led her from self-doubt and desperation to the articulation of a structural critique. She was not the problem. She knew it. Nonetheless, she could not escape the feelings of shame and desperation her predicament created.

Similarly, I asked Sharon, a white woman who had been laid off from her job, working tech support at a bank, how she was coping with being unemployed. In her response she quickly moved from addressing the emotional toll it took to a commentary on how much she wants to work and sees herself as a worker. This inability to work, despite her desire, was the source of much emotional distress. But even as she claimed this identity and emphasized her not being lazy, she noted how unrewarded this impulse was under the current system. Sharon said:

If I didn’t have my family to support me, I would be in the loony bin probably. That’s being honest. I don’t know how some of these people—I’ve got friends that haven’t worked in over a year. I’m one of those people that’s like, if I have to work for McDonald’s, I’ll go to work for McDonald’s. I also figure out that what I make at McDonald’s is less than unemployment. I’d have to claim all the money I make at McDonald’s, so
I can’t claim unemployment. The way that they have, the amount that you’re allowed for unemployment, it sucks.

At first this statement seems like many of the last ones—she’s explaining that she has a desire to work and sees no form of work beneath her. But she also begins to note that this willingness to do any job is, in fact, a useless quality in the current economy. Even if she got that McDonald’s job, it would pay so little, and unemployment benefits are so weak that it would keep her in largely the same precarious place. In effect, this patchwork system of work and welfare in a city that alleged to provide ample opportunities for people who want to work hard and prosper from it, would penalize her financially if she were to actually work hard at this job.

I asked one woman who was in her sixties what she would have done differently when she was young and choosing a career if she had the opportunity. She had lost what she felt was her only shot at a comfortable retirement when she was laid off from a job that had been demanding and low paying early on, with the hopes that it would pay off later when she had established herself at the firm. The firm was in real estate. She had sought out the job after multiple other career failures, believing that real estate was a sure thing, a good business to be in. She said that, in retrospect, she wished she had become a plumber instead. She laughed. “People will always need their toilets fixed,” she said. But fixing and cleaning toilets and working fast food were not such sure things after all.

Participants were looking for work, and their understandings of what constituted acceptable work were shifting to a whole new set of careers, but those careers were not open to them, despite their willingness. Participants’ desire to work, and their insistence
that they are simply workers without workplaces that will recognize them as such, motivates this dissertation’s focus on the work that they do perform, be it to feed that sense of themselves as workers, to nurture their relationships with family members, as a form of investment in their futures, and even as a way simply to get by.

In Marxist thought, the unemployed have long been considered a category of people about who capitalism concerns itself only in so far as it must keep them alive and available as a reserve army of laborers. But many of these participants demonstrate the social-constructedness of this view that the unemployed are a surplus army of laborers and not simply a class of laborers contributing to the economy without receiving pay. It is in this larger context of both self-doubt and potential social shame for not working that participants described their engagement in unpaid work. References to the social stigma and the personal shame of not working were nearly universal among participants from an array of different backgrounds, from rich to desperately poor, from across the racial spectrum, and among both men and women. However, not all participants responded to these feelings in the same way, or with the same strategies for proving themselves to be useful again. Only about two-thirds of those in our sample described increasing their unpaid labor at home, for instance.

But the culture of work and workers in the United States is not felt evenly by all people, because not all people are assumed to be inherently productive or unproductive in the same way or to the same extent, and these stereotypes or “controlling images” (Collins 2000) affect cultural perceptions of individuals both at home and in their workplaces. Consider, for instance, the controlling image of Black women Collins calls
“the matriarch.” While the figure of “the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in White homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes” (Collins 2000: 83). The mythical mammy puts black womanhood to use for white children and white families in ways deemed to be positive and productive, and gains respect through her display of hard work and domestic and nurturing talent. Outside her own family, and especially when doing so is part of her paid work, black motherhood is venerated, so long as it is done in service of the broader society. But, as Collins shows, U.S. society views Black motherhood when it is performed in a Black woman’s own home quite differently than in a workplace (often imagined to be someone else’s home), as a cause of black poverty and alleged familial and individual dysfunction. Where the mammy nurtures and builds up the white child, so that his/her parents may be productive members of society and so that the white child may someday join them in this endeavor, the matriarch crushes those around her, both her children and the father of her children, through her unfeminine, willful, and domineering behavior (2000: 83-85).

These stereotypes give an especially acute meaning then to the experience of being denied the opportunity to put one’s abilities, energies, and time to work outside the home for black women that is simply not equivalent for white women or for men. As Collins points out, that the study of actual black families has discovered “few matriarchs and even fewer mammies,” is irrelevant to the persistence of the stereotype and the seeping of these images into the psyches of both the judged and those who judge (2000: 82-86). As Collins argues, “the images of the mammy and the matriarch place African-American women in an untenable position” (2000: 85). If so much depends on the place
where one does their work, and if society-at-large always-already suspects you of failing at home unless you prove otherwise, and you do so very publicly, is it any wonder the sorrow and self-doubt many unemployed black women described feeling over job loss?

And when Black women fail to live up to the demands of being both dedicated, hard workers outside the home, regardless of the racism, sexism, or broader fluctuations of the labor market, and attentive but not too-attentive mothers in the home, the controlling image of the “welfare queen” triples down on the condemnation. The welfare queen fails as both worker and mother, as her moral corruption and her lack of productivity combine in a toxic picture of Black femininity. As Collins argues, “the controlling image of the welfare mother […] shifts the angle of vision away from the structural sources of poverty and blames the victims themselves” (2000: 87).

Edna’s inability to fully convince her family (or herself, for that matter) of her lack of culpability for her own predicament, for the fact that she was not working even at Burger King, is linked to a long history of blaming individual Black women for the problems they, their families, and their communities encounter. While Edna and Sharon both feel themselves battling the perception that they are lazy, and are willing to do almost anything at all just to be workers again and prove their social value, Edna’s burden is one of historic weight, as well as familial. At the very least, Sharon can turn to the family for solace, for a sense of self that reinforces her will, when she has little else. Edna’s relationship with her family is fraught and they are themselves part of the problem Edna faces with believing in her own value. But culturally, even if her family had her
back, so to speak, and believed that she was doing everything in her power to find a job,.Edna’s family success would face distinct standards of judgment.

While many participants in this study described an increase in their unpaid labor during their unemployment and described countless forms of laboring that contributed to their own reproduction during that time, their families’ reproduction, and to the larger community’s reproduction, a complex array of individual, social, and historic inequalities shape the motivation behind that work, the particular form that work takes, and the rewards or burdens it brings with it. As I will show in the following chapters, while each person’s story is unique, complex, personal, and yet mediated by a host of cultural discourses and controlling images of work and identity, there are nonetheless two diverging trends in their stories: those for whom these personal circumstances, ideologies, and cultural discourses can be negotiated through unpaid labor in order to improve their lives, either temporarily or in the long-term, and those for whom this labor has the opposite effect. In the next chapter, I examine post-feminist models of feminine and masculine success to consider the stories of several participants who increased their unpaid labor during unemployment and found these tasks to provide for them and their families something they had found missing while they were employed.
Chapter 3: Housework as a Silver Lining to Job Loss

Angela McRobbie describes post-feminism as “a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined [... and] that through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism” (2004: 255). Though McRobbie and others have examined post-feminism as a pop cultural discourse, I see evidence of it in the language of those participants in my study who distance themselves from traditional gender roles, even while embracing particularly individualist and family-based solutions to the economic crisis and to their predicaments in particular. I classify as post-feminist those participants who express nontraditional views about gender roles and explicitly oppose a “separate spheres” model of gender and heterosexuality, and yet, while they never explicitly speak against the gains of the feminist movement, they also ascribe to individualism, economism, and a certain blaming of the housewife for her own predicament as they describe their view of proper, successful womanhood in the current age.

In this chapter, I will examine post-feminist participants who enjoy the work of domestic labor and childcare, before analyzing those with more ambivalent perspectives
on this labor, despite their relative economic and familial security, in chapter four. I will focus on a few individuals who experienced reproductive labor during their unemployment primarily as a positive experience and who were able to make sense of this experience through already-existing neoliberal and postfeminist discourses of success. Through this analysis, I will show that it is important to examine those for whom reproductive labor is a silver lining in their personal financial crisis, rather than a force for depletion. Their experiences of reproductive labor do not undermine the SRF contention that unpaid reproductive labor has great payoffs for society as a whole and that it is unevenly distributed across the working-class.

Instead, their experiences shed light on how it is possible that the uneven distribution of household labor by gender, race, nationality, even within one country, has persisted amidst upheaval. For certain postfeminist participants experiencing crisis, domestic work is neither a disutility, nor an immediate, unadulterated, and limitless gain or source of fulfillment. It is something they can choose to do, and often do choose to do, particularly when doing so allows them to invest valuable care and development in themselves or their children. And while there are certain financial and familial cushions or privileges that lend themselves to this outlook on reproductive labor, cushions that are likely to remain and perhaps even become more robust after unemployment ends, I focus on the discourses and ideologies that accompany such outlooks on reproductive labor and which allow participants to feel relatively stable even amidst crisis. Beyond this, these discourses about individuals, the value of work and of pay, and about the future and the forces that will shape it, travel with the participant beyond their particular experience of
unemployment and their household. These experiences become a part of the fabric of the social whole, as norms and the particular pieces of the political and cultural discourses available, are reproduced through the participants’ own laboring, just as material inequalities are.

Postfeminism and domesticity
In general, critiques of postfeminism have dealt with housework and childcare minimally, perhaps because some of the most iconic postfeminist figures think and perform little to none of it. Consider *Sex and the City’s* Carrie Bradshaw, one of McRobbie’s most cited examples of postfeminist femininity in pop culture:

This endless masquerade [of femininity] on the part of the lead character shows how *Sex and the City* works as a provocation to second-wave feminism and how it enacts a kind of gender re-stabilization by summoning the ghost of the old disapproving feminist, (did she ever really exist?) only to dismiss her in a flash by over-doing, quite hysterically and fearfully, the comforting rituals of femininity (2008: 541).

Amidst all these acts of “gender restabilization,” however, is an odd character quirk that works as an on-going joke in the series: Carrie Bradshaw is not at all domestic. In fact, she has never cooked in her own kitchen. But for figures like Carrie Bradshaw, the problem with domestic work was never that of the second wave of feminism—that it was oppressive, sexist, or otherwise harmful. Rather domestic work was simply boring and unnecessary for a post-feminist heroine with the expendable income available to eat out
(and fabulously) for every meal. Why work when one can consume the problem instead? The career-oriented participants in this chapter view domestic work in a variety of mostly positive ways—they don’t find it boring like Carrie did, but they, too, see it as delinked from gender roles and the feminist discourse of disutility.

Positive associations with domestic labor among women who consider themselves modern and egalitarian-minded are not holdovers or holdouts from a pre-feminist past, but are products of the contemporary, post-feminist, and neoliberal moment itself. In *Homeward Bound: Why Women Are Embracing the New Domesticity*, Emily Matchar argues that pleasure-taking in domestic work is a direct response to the anxieties the political economic moment in time creates. Matchar argues, “The draw of nostalgic domesticity is not surprising. We’re living in scary times. The economy has been in the toilet for several years now, with little sign of rebound” (2013: 11). She goes on to mention the lack of trust Americans feel in the food industry and what they eat, and the collective sense, especially among young, educated adults, that the very environment in which we live faces the impending doom brought on by climate crisis, as possible reasons for Americans to do more of their own domestic work, rather than relying on the service industry (2013: 11-12). But Matchar’s analysis focuses on a nostalgic enactment of domestic work that finds its motivation in a romanticized notion of the doing of things for one’s self, and it comes in response to a general cultural zeitgeist of mistrust and anxiety about the consumer market. This is not the primary motivation of most or even some of the participants in this study, who are alienated from the economic and political systems as workers, rather than as consumers. The predicament of a post-feminist subject who is
denied the subjectivities of a paid worker requires a different understanding of the place of unpaid labor.

Elizabeth Nathanson (2009) has focused on postfeminist media’s depiction of the time-crunch associated with modern women’s double burden with paid work and with housework and childcare. Nathanson argues that the successful postfeminist woman strives to find a balance between work inside and outside the home, which requires “a comfortable relationship to time” (2009: 314). In the context of long-term unemployment, a subject’s “relationship to time” is just as much at the heart of her contentedness with how much housework she performs/is able to perform. The performance I categorize as postfeminist and as having a positive view of reproductive labor during their unemployment all share in common a lack of urgency about returning to the labor force, though they all plan to do so and are making efforts to find employment. What separates them from many other participants is a sense that they have time, time before their savings are gone, time before they have to settle for just any part-time job, and time to take care of things for themselves and others that they did not have while they were working. In fact, during unemployment, these more successful postfeminist subjects can find pleasure in unpaid work during unemployment precisely because it is an opportunity to right the work-life balance they may not have had while they were working for pay.

The new domesticity is perhaps most striking in its popularity among educated women who have many progressive gender ideologies, but it has also emerged as a part of a newly recognizable masculinity. In particular, Hannah Hamad has argued,
hegemonic masculinities in the postfeminist moment include highly valuing the identity of father as well as some of the work of fatherhood (2013). Hamad argues that in postfeminist films, not only is paternity and a strong identification of manhood with fatherhood an acceptable paradigm of masculinity, but that paternity is the “dominant paradigm” of masculinity (1). This postfeminist valorization of men’s efforts in childrearing and parenting focuses mostly on care labor, rather than the nitty gritty work of housework and the physical and messy aspects of childrearing. Most men in this study who discussed positive experiences of unpaid labor during their unemployment likewise focused on the time it allowed them to spend with their children. But they were more likely to discuss this time in the context of leisure activities they engaged in, rather than as work or effort they had deliberately taken on to fill their time.

One unique participant, John, who was married to a woman and had no children, spoke positively about the opportunity to do more around the house after he was laid off from his job as a textbook editor. Doing more around the house not only gave him something to do and to occupy his unused time, but also gave him something to contribute to the household his wife’s income was sustaining. John spoke of his marriage as a fundamentally equal one, and in the context of his unemployment and her still working, that equality manifested itself as requiring more of him around the house. John explained:

In terms of identity, my wife and I have very equal heads in gender and all that stuff. But we’ve been joking lately that I’ve become the wife, I use that as a joke not as anything. But you know, I do all the grocery
shopping, all the cooking, all the cleaning, which is certainly fine. I have
no issue with that whatsoever. But, beforehand, dishes never got done. We
were both like, ‘We don’t have time. We don’t want to get out a mop.’
And one of us would finally mop or whatever.

For John and his wife, their previous egalitarian arrangement involved an equal
commitment to not doing particular chores regularly, or at all, as much as it did an
equal distribution of actually performing those chores. As in post-feminist pop
cultural texts, housework was an option, and as in many of those texts, John’s
changing relationship to consumer power and to time impacted the extent to
which housework became an obligation. The effects of the Recession were not
limited just to who did chores, but to which chores seemed to need to be done on
a regular basis. Dishes were getting done. The floor was being mopped. Now it
was something John owed to her.

But now, like I have said, “You’re working all these hours, I’m at home.
I’m more than happy to take over all the housework, you know. I’ll go
grocery shopping.”

John, who was fascinated by the recession and what it represented for larger
society, speculated on how his experience of feeling positively about his newly
magnified role in household labor compared with other men in his position.

I have to wonder how that’s affected a lot of different families. Even
before the recession they may not have been as interested in gender
equality and that kind of thing. I have to wonder how that kind of ripple
effect has happened. You know?

John stressed his comfort with housework and shopping to show he is not the kind of man
who is bothered or threatened by participating in such things. Additionally, he assured the
interviewer, his becoming the wife in the relationship was merely a joke, not something
that actually concerns him or that he and his wife actually see in such gendered terms.
John even speculated that there are likely the kinds of men out there who might not
previously have seen themselves as equal with their wives in this area, and whose ideas
might have been changed by the Recession. John, unlike women in his position, gained a
certain social capital from constructing himself as an evolved man compared to others, or
at least he assumed he did as he interacted with a woman interviewer who was asking
him explicitly about his views about gender and household labor. While this speculation,
joking, and reassurance of an egalitarian marriage may have been unique to John and the
only other male participant I would categorize as seeing housework as a major positive
during unemployment, there were several things about what he said that seemed to echo
the outlook of the women participants in this category. The insistence on not having
traditional gendered expectations, the variability in what household chores were critical
and which were optional, based on changing family and employment circumstances, and
the sense that some people are just more cut out for this kind of work than others.

In this chapter, I focus on two women participants who expressed this
postfeminist, positive outlook on reproductive labor. Unemployed women’s tendency to
do more housework than similarly unemployed men, and men’s tendency to increase
their leisure time at greater levels than their engagement with housework, makes the motivations behind women’s time-use more important to understand. In addition to my focus on these women, it also shows how similar ideologies have permeated the thinking of women with children and those who have purposely decided not to have them.

For Brie, a black woman in her 40s, married, with one teenaged child, the pleasures of being at home during job loss were less about productivity around the house for its own sake, or to prove to her how not-lazy she was, and more about her ability to invest time and care in what she called “her projects,” which included her house as well as her daughter. Brie had bounced around the financial services industry for her entire adult working life. A former valedictorian, and a college graduate, she considered the array of mid-level jobs she had held in the industry, from customer service to technical support, to have been a good test of her adaptability and her willingness to learn new jobs. Brie and her husband had fought hard to build a house, and then remain financially secure, in a mixed-race and mixed-income suburb southeast of Columbus. Building this life had taken work and lots of energy and strategizing in the past. Because her husband was still employed as a car salesman, and even though he made less than she had when she worked, she found her unemployment actually gave her a chance to rest, to think about what she wanted next and how she wanted to spend her time. She was able to pace herself on the job market, to apply for jobs that seemed like interesting opportunities, and to take time for herself and her family, as well as for the job market.

Perhaps it was Brie’s relatively stable financial and familial status that eased any feelings of self-doubt, that prevented the creep of desperation to get back to work, any
work, as quickly as possible, or that cured her of any need to prove to me or seemingly anyone else that she was not a lazy person. Her class status and, by all appearances, her very happy and mostly traditional family life, seemed to protect her from responding to controlling images either of the unemployed or of black women in general. Instead, she was able to focus her narrative on the question of successful, well-balanced motherhood, a distinctively post-feminist discourse in which neither complete devotion to the family nor to one’s career success could make one a successful woman. But, with the right timing, the right kind of planning, and the right job, Brie would explain, it did seem possible for an individual woman, at least a smart one, to achieve the balance today’s successful women should have achieved.

Brie explained that it was this opportunity for balance that had helped her feel almost relaxed about her unemployment, at least for now:

Well, I think [unemployment has] given me more time to focus and just exhale, because when I was working, it was like I was constantly working, working, working, at work, and going to school. One point at a time I was going, taking some extra, accelerated classes on the side. And it was like, I exhaust myself. Again, I never really take real vacations that the last vacation I remember I took when I was in IT, I was too busy calling in the works at the conference calls, putting people together, still working. And so, I put a lot of things on the back burner: spending time with the family, doing things around the house. So, now I’ve been available to take my daughter back and forth to choir.
I asked how that got done while she was busy working, and Brie noted that this stuff simply did not get done before (much like John’s mopping). Not working had allowed Brie’s daughter the opportunity to participate in an additional extracurricular activity, solely because Brie was now free to provide her transportation to and from the activity during regular working hours. Brie’s relationship with time had changed to allow for this new activity, as well as for her to engage in many other domestic activities, including performing care work for a neighbor. Brie explained:

[My daughter] hasn’t participated in anything before, because between me and my husband’s schedule, neither one of us could really commit to picking her up at a certain time after school. So, you know, I’ve been able to pick her up from school, run errands if she forgets something, taking her to appointments, do things for other people. Since I’ve been off, my next-door neighbor had a stroke, so she has her mother living with her. So, she’s a really big help, but I go back and forth, helping her from time to time.

In addition to being more available to her own family and able to take of her own desired projects, Brie was able to provide care for a neighbor, to contribute service above and beyond her immediate family’s needs. Brie’s unemployment had freed her up to do more around her house as well, and to return to projects she had long hoped to accomplish while she was working, but had been unable to find time for.
Like, cleaning, I’ve been intending to paint the upstairs hallway for over a year now, so everything is laid out now. I’ll be, just think, putting the tape down and getting started. It’s a small area, but all those mixed crannies and stuff. [I] fix things, mend things.

Even as Brie listed the activities she had been freed up to participate in since losing her job as silver linings, she seemed to become exhausted by the thought of them. Apropos of nothing from me, she transitioned directly from this list to the problem she saw with being a stay-at-home mom instead of trying to return to paid work as soon as she found a suitable job. Brie explained,

Yeah, I don’t think I can be a stay-at-home mom. I don’t see how people do it. But around the house it’s like I have to establish myself a routine of, ‘Okay, I’ll look up and apply for some jobs, and then I’ll do some things, sort of plan out the week or the day. I always like to have something to do.

[...].

Though these activities were a boon to her while she was unemployed, Brie stressed that they would look different outside the temporary conditions she faced now. They would not bring her pleasure long-term; they only did so now because they gave her the ability to plan, to think of herself in relation to the future, in a way that her joblessness had otherwise made impossible. Brie seemed to suggest that the reproductive work she was engaged in was only a silver lining now because she had chosen to see it that way. What choice did she have? She had to establish a routine for herself around the house. She had to push forward and turn this setback into an investment opportunity. She had to turn
something she had not planned for, nor that she would have wanted for herself had she been given the choice, into an opportunity for planning she did not have otherwise. Brie was writing her own agency into significance as she explained her positive outlook on the experience of unemployment.

Brie’s desire for a plan for herself was something she had hoped to instill in her daughter. Brie wanted to make her daughter a planner as well, a woman who someday might be able to achieve that ideal balance of family and career success, if only she made the right decisions and made the right moves. She was especially concerned about instilling in her daughter the need to plan for one’s career from an early age, so that she could attain all the training and experience she would need to pursue it. I asked whether her daughter understood what she was going through during unemployment. Brie said that she understood the basics of it, and that Brie had tried to talk to her about the jobs she was looking at and which she was applying to. She wanted her to know how these decisions could be made. Brie had also used the opportunity to discuss her daughter’s plans for her future, especially after she finished high school.

I’ve applied for this job or that job and I may tell her a little about the job. And it gives me an opportunity to talk to her about her career choices [...]. So the importance of being focused, finding what your passions are, and sticking with it because I’ve always been kind of like, I don’t want to be boxed in. I’m good at a lot of things and I love learning anything. So, I’ve kind of been more open but still being realistic and--drill down your
passions and figure what fits into that. So, I kind of tie that into what she’s doing right now, so it works.

Brie described unpaid labor that went above and beyond transporting her daughter between activities and keeping a better handle on maintaining the house. She had been investing her time in shaping her daughter, not just as a person with particular values, but who would be a skilled navigator of a future job market. Brie was concerned that her daughter was unfocused and impractical when it came to choosing hobbies and deciding which skills to develop.

First of all, comparing to how she was last school year to this school year, which I think it helped. Last school year, she--they’re all in entertainer stuff--she wants to dance...she wants to do something in entertainment. Now, she’s very good at dancing, but she hasn’t done that in a while, but she’s very dedicated and all that. She used to want to go--wanted me to take her to these trips in New York to audition for stuff, and she’s not even ready for all that, but you don’t tell a child that. So, I would say, we can do that but maybe you can find something local here that you wanna audition for, or something like that. I started looking up stuff and then I would explain to her, well, how does this relate to what you want to do? She would say, ‘Ooh, this is my passion. This is what I want to do.’

Wondering whether her aspirations for her daughter consisted mostly of greater success in a paid career, and not necessarily with her talents in unpaid domestic work, I asked her whether her daughter helped with chores around the house. Was an appreciation for and
talent in Brie’s domestic “projects,” something she wished to teach to her daughter while she had this newfound parenting time on her hands?

Uhhh. She used to do the dishes but now I primarily do the dishes and stuff. But her areas, her domains are trying to keep her room clean and organized, which is a constant battle. It’ll be organized for one day then messy for like...whatever, and the basement. So, she has a couple areas.

Brie’s daughter had previously had domains of responsibility in the management of the household, but with Brie at home, the burden on her daughter had shifted. A better use of her time was perhaps now not dish washing, but work that would contribute to her career and to her health and physical fitness. Brie moved quickly from discussing her daughter’s participation in domestic work to her time-use more generally, confirming my suspicion that while Brie saw a clear value in the completion of domestic projects, these were not the most pressing needs she saw for her daughter’s training.

And for the summer I asked her to come up with a plan for her activity and chores. Give me a plan. What are you going to do to exercise? Because kids these days don’t get enough exercise. They’re on the phone all the time. So, I’ve asked her to lay that out, so she’s given me a primary plan. But I said I wanted her to have it formatted and put in a way that you post it on a bulletin board. So then I’d like you to sign up on the fitness app and then let me see--so I can check up on what activities you’re doing.

Brie laughed, seemingly at herself and the office-like management techniques she had brought to bear on her daughter and home. She continued,
So she signed up on the fitness app yesterday, I think. I’m waiting to see her plan. Like, you can’t be lying around all summer and I can’t keep finding things for you to do. I feel like my life is kind of on hold because I can’t plan. I don’t feel comfortable planning other stuff for her because I don’t know what my schedule might be when I find a job.

After she had listed the many things she liked to do around the house because of the routine it gave her, I asked her why she thought she couldn’t be a stay-at-home mom, despite these pleasures she took in housework and caring for her daughter and others. She explained,

Well, if my husband earned a lot more money that wouldn’t be a problem, but I would spend more money. I think I would...I find too many projects and things that I want to do. [...] Yeah, I definitely spend more money. I need to make some money so that I can spend the money too.

Brie laughed as she finished this thought about her own consumerist urges. Paid work was better than what she was doing now because, well, it paid. But even this consumerism that drove her desire to return to paid work as soon as she could was couched again in the language of productivity and accomplishment. Whatever else she wanted to spend money on, completing “projects” was a major part of it:

So yeah, like I said, before we had bought our house, I was working still in healthcare. We just built the house and we scrimped and saved, got a down payment, and cut back on some things while we were living in an apartment. And I was looking very carefully at all these housing things,
and everything was going well. I was wondering, “How is everyone getting all of these houses?” [...] I remember one time while we were out, and a sales person was showing us these different houses, and [I] was like, “How come all these people are always having all of these yard sales all the time. Are they trying to raise money to pay the mortgage or what?” She laughed. “And they said, ‘Uh, yeah.’” She laughed again. Brie had identified bad buyers, and she had then gone to great efforts to make sure she and her husband were good buyers instead.

So I studied and learned about it...they made me take classes too because we were on the FHA loan. And I studied on my own and looking at things on how these mortgages worked and the interest you paid. What happened was some of these people got under these mortgages and arms and interest plans, that just really were ridiculous. And I made sure ours was fixed, and we refinanced once, I think, maybe twice, and I always made sure that our interest rates were a fixed rate that we could pay. We would know what it is all the time.

Through her self-motivated research and study, Brie and her husband had put themselves in a position to be good buyers, competent in personal finance: a position in which they could plan for their future. Her desire to care for her daughter through teaching basic forms of economic adaptability and encouraging skill-acquisition in a broader set of areas became a parallel form of investment. Education and market-savviness were not limited to importance in financial matters, but in familial matters as well. They are the basis of
good parenting for Brie. They were the reason that despite her employment tribulations Brie and her family were seemingly secure in their house while many others were not.

The Productive Post-Feminist

In part, the experience of housework as a silver lining to job loss is a natural and useful response to the real or imagined perception that unemployment might reflect on the subject as lazy, as discussed in chapter one. If one finds or reports finding comfort in the ability to do more work, and work they are not paid for, then certainly one cannot be accused of being lazy or uninterested in working. Since losing her job as a sales manager for a major national department store chain in 2011, Laura, a 33-year-old white woman, had enrolled in a pre-nursing program at a local community college, took on part-time, minimum-wage work at a neighborhood bike shop, was engaged in a rigorous fitness regimen, and had been remodeling and thoroughly cleaning her home. No person could reasonably call her lazy or uninterested in working.

Laura’s identity as a hard worker, one who expended energy and produced a better self and better surroundings, whether or not her efforts were compensated, was paramount in nearly every aspect of her unemployment experience. She provided a narrative of how she had reached this point. Her unemployment had not always been such a sunny time or one full of possibility, productivity, and self-improvement. Shortly after losing her job, she said, she sunk into a grave depression. She could barely get out of bed, let alone do anything to take care of her house or her own health. Then one day, she hit rock bottom. Her boyfriend, Dave, with whom she lived, came home from work and told
her she had to get up and do something with herself. What she had to do involved work—both work on herself and work on her home.

She made a plan for herself, enrolled in college classes and began cleaning her house and cooking healthy food. She took a part-time job at a bike shop, just to have something to do, she said. And at the bike shop, she asked the owners if she could plant and care for a garden. She filled her days with tasks and she relished the opportunity to complete them. She had since lost a significant amount of weight, and she credited much of this to her own self-discipline and a newfound love for cycling. She and Dave, her boyfriend, had that love in common, which was a big part of what initially attracted her to him when they met online. She immediately knew that he was different from her ex-husband, whom she had divorced just two years earlier. Laura explained that she had little savings when she lost her job, because she’d had to pay a settlement to her ex-husband as a part of their divorce. “So I unfortunately had to pay him money to go away...I made more money than he did so...” She trailed off. She made more money than he did and so she felt she had been punished for that after they divorced. Her financial responsibilities in the divorce had only made her predicament slightly worse, however. She contrasted her ex-husband and his impact on her life and finances, with the positive and supportive influence Dave had been. She said of her ex-husband: “He is lazy. The army just taught him how to be lazier. Would you think it would be acceptable to go to your job and play video games during the day instead of doing what you are supposed to be doing?” I agreed that I would not. Laura also mentioned, in passing, that her ex had
cheated on her. He was unfaithful. But for Laura, his laziness was at least as important a flaw, in helping me to understand the end of her marriage.

Laura and I were meeting in a study room at the community college where she was taking classes. She was unique there among the other students. A homeowner, a college degree in hand, enough access to wealth to take a break from paid work, and she was also a great deal older than most of her classmates. She didn’t think much of many of her classmates, most of them younger and going into considerable debt to be taking classes they didn’t seem all that prepared to take in the first place, in her opinion. They were unfocused, she felt, and didn’t understand how to choose a career that would actually make whatever they were sacrificing to be in college worth it in the end. I glanced around the library, as she complained about her classmates. Almost all of the students utilizing the library were young and black.

She was not like them. Laura was there because she had found and lost a career once already, and she was determined to have a more stable one in her second go-around. Going to community college was not an act of desperation, on her part, but one of the many signs that she knew how to navigate the economy sensibly these days. She felt she had considered her options enough and looked into nursing and its position in the current global economy sufficiently. Unlike retail, this industry and occupation seemed desperate for more consummate professionals like she knew herself to be. She also knew better than to spend too much on college this time. It simply wasn’t necessary to go into more debt than she needed. This career-mindedness and desire to invest in her own education and career even while money was relatively tight for her came from her very sense of
who she was as a woman, and who she did not want to be. Her mother was the chief example of someone she did not want to be: a woman who put marriage and family above pursuing a career.

This is gonna sound terrible of me. My mom has a degree in, I can’t remember. I don’t know what it’s called but she used to work with physically handicapped children in doing recreational programming with them. [...] And so she went to school for this for four years and then met my dad and she was working at a bank while he was working at the hospital, but she kind of gave up her career in her last four years of her work and her life to follow my dad around. And I never wanted to style my life around a man, just because I thought that was weak of her.

Laura saw her identity as a career woman and a self-improving individual as an alternative to giving up a career to have children and a marriage, as her mother had done, but also as an alternative to having children at all. Though the ultimately inevitable outcome of the post-feminist heroine is settling down, marrying a man, and having children. Laura discussed her career and her hobbies as perfectly valid alternative forms of reproductive energy for a post-feminist subject. Despite not wanting children and not wanting to be the person her mother had been, sacrificing herself for the care of others, Laura participated in countless social reproductive activities, most of them for no pay, on a daily basis. Ultimately, her positive judgment of these activities and their value came back to the self, not to the social or the traditionally familial:
I never wanted [kids]. That was never a focus. I literally always wanted to be a career woman and I always scorned my mom for having the opportunity and not being a career woman and wanting to have babies. And you know what I am adopted, my mom was 16 when she gave birth to me and she gave me up for adoption. My goal in life was to never get pregnant, ever, before I was married. And then I got married and, ehh, look how [that] turned out. I don’t think I need children.

Aside from her bad marriage (and was it really her fault her husband had turned out to be so lazy? After all, he was not so lazy when she met him, but had, according to her, become lazier while in the Army), Laura prided herself on having made good decisions about her life, and she credited these decisions with putting her in a position to be more resilient while underemployed. The decisions not to get pregnant, first as a teenager (as her biological mother had done), and then in a marriage that was doomed to fail, and then her ability to execute this decision and live up to her goal, were reflections of her suitability to navigate the economy, this time even better than she had before her job loss. Laura’s biological, reproductive decisions were as sound as her investments in her education, her decision not to take on student debt, and her earlier real estate decision-making. She made her decisions for her future self in a rapidly changing but not indecipherable marketplace of jobs, obstacles, and opportunities.

Had she made mistakes? She wondered aloud if she should have gone to law school instead of chasing ever-greater paychecks when she started working in
retail management. And maybe she would have kept her job longer if she had kept her mouth shut about a new VP while at a regional meeting one morning (though in the end, she noted, everyone on her team had been laid off within a few months of her own dismissal). Overall, she was doing well and she had lived her life well. She had made the good decision to pull herself from depression. She had made a good decision to begin cycling and taking better care of her physical health. And she was making the wise decision now to begin a career in a field that did not seem likely to receive cuts any time soon, in an industry that was legally obligated to provide her with a certain number of benefits and with security. For her, others, like her ex-husband, were not as cut out for taking care of themselves and making good decisions for themselves. These people included many of her classmates at the community college she was attending, whose aptitude for college and for making wise decisions about how much money to spend on getting degrees she doubted.

“I am very lucky. I am very, very blessed. My parents, and they have been doing this for the last five years, they decided that they didn’t want to wait to pass money on to their children, so they give the three of us all $600 a month,” she said. While she noted that she was very lucky to receive this monthly income, her awareness of just how much more liberty this regular unearned income provided her was less apparent in her discussion of others’ failures and her own successes. For instance, like Brie, Laura credited her ability to stay afloat with her mortgage while she was unemployed to her smart investment and decision-making prowess years earlier. Where others had over-
extended themselves, she bought smart. She made no mention of any particular privilege she might have that had allowed her to buy smart, such as her regular income from her parents, access to financial education and literacy, or, say, that she was unlikely to have been targeted with predatory lending, as many poor, people of color were during the house boom (Center for Responsible Lending 2005; Burd-Sharps and Rasch 2015).

And now, like then, instead of feeling sorry for herself, she had taken control of her own fate and had been smart about doing so. She had assessed the economy and what opportunities it held and was remaking herself into someone who would succeed in it again as she embarked on a second career path. After the tough talk with her boyfriend at the height of her depression, Laura had molded and modeled herself as a successful paradigm of an unemployed person during neoliberalism, *a homo oeconomicus*, a rational actor who does for oneself, believes in the efficacy of her own actions, and believes individuals will be rewarded for making good decisions for themselves and punished for making bad ones. Laura’s renewed interest in reproductive labor, in self-care, in a new career, and in personal fitness all coincided as part of one major metamorphosis. What Laura touted above all else was *the pleasure* of work, as long as you’re playing the game right. Laura’s own narrative of her transformation highlights the ideological inequality these differing experiences of unemployment and reproductive labor can have. Beyond the fact of the unpaid labor of the relatively economic secure leading to the further perpetuation of material advantage, *vis-a-vis* other unemployed workers, are these ideological effects.
As Laura’s ideologies served to motivate and comfort her, they also served as a potential and sometimes realized ruler by which to measure the failures of others with less advantage: If in her mind she had what she had because she had earned it, that was a further sign that those others, from her ex-husband to her classmates at the community college, did not have, because they did not earn. Laura’s narrative was one of past failure brought on by the unknown, a present characterized by self-motivated efforts to correct for the mistakes that allowed that failure in the past, and determination that her future would be better due to her own efforts. Her performance of unpaid labor both in and outside her own home served to bolster these narratives. Even if there was no relationship between keeping a garden, cleaning one’s house, and having the economic security to take a break from the job market and re-gear, Laura’s narrative connected them. Her unpaid laboring was a sign that she was not lazy, and her lack of laziness was the real reason she was in the good position she was in. In all this, her past failures could be dismissed as external while her successes were hers, her partner’s (whom she had the wisdom to date), and theirs alone to claim.

The limits of housework happiness

Despite this belief that housework is a silver lining, Brie and Laura, as well as John for that matter, were clear that any pleasure they got from doing this work while they were unemployed did not lead to a preference for this work over paid work. For Brie, not having a job was bad for the same reasons having more time to spend with her daughter is good: their impacts on what can be invested in her daughter. Brie said,
“I’ve lowered my expectations, because again, we really don’t need a lot. But I mean, if we’re doing fine right now, we’re not saving. If we’re doing fine right now, obviously, it doesn’t take a lot to get by. But what my concern is, is that when everybody suggests that we [just] get by...we have a fourteen year old daughter who wants to go to college, and I want to be able to save and, you know, do some things for her. Or at least get enough of some other things paid off so that, you know, she’ll be okay--because that’ll be another thing that we’ll have to worry about that’s like in four more years, I guess.”

Brie had mentioned that many people in their neighborhood were moving on to bigger and better houses. Those friends could afford it, she explained, implying that they could not. They were losing many of the friends her daughter had once spent time with, and the neighborhood did not feel like it used to. I asked Brie whether she would continue trying to buy a bigger house in a different neighborhood at this point in her life. She said she would not, not unless they came into a windfall of money. Even then, she corrected herself, they would probably just do some renovations to the home they owned.

She explained, “My daughter. She’s fourteen at this age. You have to create a life for her. In your thirties, you’re trying to accumulate and grow. It’s go, go. Then you’re in your forties, and you’re trying to just maintain and save.” Brie sees her own age and her aging wrapped up in her family life, and defines that family life and how it should ebb and flow at least partly as though it is part of a market cycle as much as a biological one. There was a time for a boom-and-bust approach to life, where biological reproduction,
increasing her earnings, and investing money all ran parallel, which she is now past. Now her ability to maintain her lifestyle and to save money for her daughter’s future aligned neatly with her responsibilities as a parent, to stay in one place, one home, one suburb (where she was attending the one good high school), and to let her daughter become rooted enough to plan for her own approaching cycle of life-work-family development.

The privilege and precarity of planning
I asked Brie how she felt about the economic crisis now that she had been impacted by it directly, a question that often prompted participants to share their political views or larger outlook for themselves beyond their most immediate needs. Though she had readily listed the benefits of her unemployment for herself and her family throughout the interview, she saw the negatives of the predicament she was in, in much more abstract terms, not as a list of woes that were befalling her now or could befall her soon, but as bad outcomes she could not even predict, let alone list in concrete detail. The bad economy was something so big and so distant that she could not understand exactly what threat it posed to her, but she still had to live with its temperaments on the horizon.

The economic crisis. It’s like you never really...you don’t really feel it as an individual when you’re going through something. You can only just understand what you’re going through at that moment. You don’t know how big it is, you don’t know how bad it is, until people tell you exactly what it is. So, you turn on the news and people tell you, “Oh, the economy is down and unemployment is up ten percent.” And you’re like, “Well,
I’m a part of that ten percent.” So, you take it from what other people are
telling you: that it’s good or bad. But as an individual you don’t really
know.
For Brie, just to knowledge that she was part of a huge group of people laid off in a
national or even international economic crisis was of little comfort when it came to
understanding her own predicament. This inability to make sense of her own experience
in that larger context was significant as Brie considered where the blame should lay for
her current state, for her inability to plan. Could she blame forces beyond her control or
should she blame herself for not having been prepared or recession-proof to begin with?
She continued:

[Am I] being a victim of my own, you know, shortcomings, or things that
I can control, or am I victim of things that are bigger out there, forces that
I can’t even identify, recognize, and go up against? You can only do
things...do something that you know about that you can control. But to
some extent, you can’t control whatever else is out there. That’s what’s
big and scary.

Brie’s ability to use and think of unpaid labor as a silver lining to her
unemployment and as an investment-opportunity rested on a certain level of
security, but that desire to perform labor and her ultimate belief that it was a good
thing for her to do were motivated by an ultimate feeling of precarity, of
insecurity, and of discomfort with her relationship to time, as Nathanson would
put it. For Brie, her ability to achieve balance came from her belief that she had
made good use of her past, and that her past and put her in the best position to succeed through difficulty.

Like most participants, Brie hesitated to identify herself as a victim of forces beyond her control, but she knew it was likely that she was. The ability of Brie to turn even her involuntary unemployment into an opportunity for self and family development, particularly job-market development, was an ability not everyone in such circumstances shared. They helped her to recover feelings of efficacy that she lost when she lost her job, and even to recover feelings of efficacy at home that she had wanted to be able to feel but had missed out on while she had been working. That even in a positive story like this one her world and her future were ultimately still “big and scary” shows the dominance and normalization of precarity. But despite Brie’s more modest elaborations of her own past success and her greater readiness to discuss a fear of the unknown and to admit her potential inability to cope unlike Laura, Brie shared with Laura a significant advantage among the unemployed not shared by others—the ability to find pleasure and benefit in the work of unemployment. Despite the fact that she was going through unemployment and had temporarily been rejected by the paid economy, she could still make a claim to already-be the neoliberal subject she and others were supposed to be.
Chapter 4: Ambivalence, Alienation, and the Reproduction of Devaluation

The common claim that reproductive labor and particularly housework are gendered is an attempt at capturing two complex dynamics: first, the role of gender in determining who does what housework, why, and how. Second, it points to the opposite dynamic, to the role that the performance of housework plays in constructing gender categories and ideologies, or, the extent to which involvement in a particular form of housework contributes to an individual’s and a society-wide sense of what it means to be a successful man or woman (Bianchi et al 2000; Erickson 2005; Badr and Acetelli 2008; Gerson 2010; Carlson and Lynch 2013). This chapter examines these two dynamics from the perspective of both men and women who took on more housework and childcare responsibilities in order to contribute to their families and feel productive, for their own benefit, and then ultimately rejected this work as unfulfilling. Rather than seeing that unpaid work as a silver lining to their job loss, and despite their relative financial comfort during unemployment, these participants recognize unpaid labor as undervalued by society as a whole, and as alienating, and take little comfort in it. I analyze the contexts in which participants experience unpaid domestic work, including housework and childcare, in these ways, and the kinds of inequalities these experiences produce.

In sociological scholarship, housework has been defined and delimited at least in part through gender, as jobs that women predominantly take responsibility for are
associated in some way with the home. Everything from grocery shopping to childcare to washing dishes and cooking fell into the category of housework. These tasks have been lumped together not necessarily because they all took place in the home, but because mostly women do these activities, whether they are paid or unpaid to do them. Meanwhile tasks like yard work and home repairs fell outside the confines of the category in most research. More recently, scholars have challenged this easy conflation between femininity and housework, an especially important intervention as men’s participation in housework has increased in recent years (Kroska 2004). Still, women’s disproportionate burden with many of these tasks remains significant and salient, especially in understanding their slowed and “stalled” workplace and economic advancement as perhaps a result of the time they miss in the paid workforce, or even just assumptions on the part of employers that they will be less focused on work because they will be pulled by housework (England 2010).

For decades, feminists have recognized that the disproportionate amount of time women spend doing household labor produces a host of gendered inequalities—even affecting the pay gap between men and women (Smith et al 2001; Stone and Lovejoy 2004; Stone 2007a, 2007b; Boushey 2008; Cha 2013), especially through reducing women’s time for paid work Crittenden 2001; Poeschl 2008; Lothaller et al. 2009; Bianchi et al 2012). Furthermore, Rachel Dwyer (2013) has shown that the rise in job polarization (an increasing gap between few high-paying and a majority, low-paying jobs, as middle-income jobs become more scarce) is due in part to the low wages people
involved in care work professionally perform, and the rising proportion of the job market
made up of these feminized and under-valued jobs.

Feminist scholarship across the disciplines has therefore continued to focus on
housework as a facet of women’s oppression and, increasingly, of overall class inequity,
extploring just how strong the relationship between these tasks and womanhood actually
is, why such a relationship has remained even in a post-feminist era, and what factors are
involved in producing increased gender parity in some aspects of housework and not
others. Some studies show a correlation between women’s earning parity with their
partners and more egalitarian housework divisions, suggesting that the performance of a
disproportionate amount of housework is about power dynamics within couples (Brines
1994; Gupta 2007; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). Among other limitations to
these explanations, these explanations focus mostly on dyads, and do not explain how
single men and women come to view their responsibilities around the house differently.
Some studies have shown that men and women approach housework and particular
housework and child-rearing tasks with different ideas about their power and meaning,
and suggest that this has an impact on what work they think should be done and how
often (Kroksa 2003; Altschuler 2004; Warren 2014; Swenson and Lopez 2016).

More recently, time-use studies have shown that during the recent economic
crisis, even when men and women find themselves in the common position of having lost
their jobs, women are more likely to take on more housework and childcare than men are;
men, on the other hand, increase their leisure time more than their housework time
(Aguiar, Hurst, and Karabarounis 2013; Berik et al 2015). This study did not include
specific questions about just how much time the men and women in it spent on the tasks they described adding to their routines during unemployment. However, comparing the testimonies of men and women who claim to have liked increasing their unpaid work, with those who did not, and with those who were forced to for economic survival, does suggest there is a gender imbalance in the magnitude of new responsibilities perceived by different participants. Though the men and women participants below, for instance, use similar reasons to describe their distaste for the labor, it should be noted that this does not imply that they were taking on or taking over equivalent burdens of labor.

As in the cases of the post-feminist participants in the last chapter, in each case in this chapter the subject shows awareness of these gendered dynamics in their explanations for rejecting housework, even while they explain their discomfort with housework through several different, non-gendered or gender-neutral characteristics it holds for them. Yet, as I will show in this chapter, each of the explanations contributes to the reproduction of ideologies that are central to the devaluation of housework and the devaluation of feminine labor more broadly. Whereas participants with a silver-lining outlook reject unpaid labor in the long-term mostly because it does not pay, these participants express more profound disappointments with what this labor offers to them as individuals and to society as a whole. While these participants’ relative economic security makes it unlikely that unpaid household labor will bury them in emotional, psychological, and material problems, they do not see their efforts in this area as an investment in theirs or their families’ long-term happiness. In explaining why this is the case, they show that the involuntary experience of unemployment and an increase in
domestic labor can actually lead to the reproduction of ideologies that have created an uneven gendered division of this labor already, as well as contributed to the under-valuing of this labor in the paid sphere.

Men and women in the construction of the crisis

In 2010 feminist journalist Hanna Rosin made a controversial claim: In postindustrial U.S. culture, men were on the decline and women had the upper hand, and she cautioned that we might be witnessing “the end of men.” In 2009 the New York Times made its contribution to an emerging genre of feature pieces on the economy--the “mancession” article. Based on jobs reports indicating that men had lost a greater percentage of jobs in the first year of recession (due to their greater prevalence in the earliest- and worst-hit industries, especially manufacturing), newspapers and magazines alike sought to explore a new phenomenon—an increase in homes where women were the primary income earners and a new mass of men who were unemployed. The so-called mancession prompted speculation on potential social transformations that went far beyond the recession. The New York Times wondered whether the mancession marked the end of the debate on whether women should work outside the home or not, or the debate over whether women were increasingly opting out. Catherine Rampell wrote, “Should the male-dominated layoffs of the current recession continue [...] the debate will be moot. A deep and prolonged recession, therefore, may change not only household budgets and habits; it may also challenge longstanding gender roles” (2009). But to what extent was the recession not just creating temporary crises in the division of labor, but having long-
term effects on how men and women thought about themselves and the labor they did? Was the recession indeed challenging “longstanding gender roles”? 

As Mimi Abramovitz notes, the employment trends that characterized the mancession began to reverse almost as soon as the term broke into the mainstream (2013). Women began losing jobs at faster rates due to public-sector cuts and men began gaining jobs at higher rates, in part due to the Obama administration’s stimulus package that restored lost work in the construction field. Despite a few news pieces on the end or even the myth of the mancession, however, the narrative of the economic crisis as a crisis for men remained prominent as my colleagues and I interviewed job seekers in the aftermath of the economic crisis between 2012 and 2014.

Sometimes, the men we spoke to treated a new arrangement in housework due to their joblessness as a nice change of pace, at least temporarily. More frequently, it was treated as a matter-of-fact form of responsibility they had to their partners or their families. When an interviewer asked one participant about whether he helps out more at home now that his wife is working part-time to support the family during his unemployment, the man seemed in some ways surprised by the question, responding quite simply, “Of course. I’m her husband.” These responses reflected the normalization and even valorization of certain kinds of fatherhood tasks, which are emblematic of the post-feminist moment discussed in chapter two.

Such stories might seem to align with the hopes of the most optimistic mancession features, confirming their hopes that men were now doing more and having increasingly open attitudes about engaging in that work, but the nonchalance of most men
contradicts the “mancession” story’s notions of crisis, upheaval, and rupture. Rather, what the stories of those who felt this way about picking up the slack at home show is the contingency of purpose and meaning around household labor, particularly in relationship to economic well-being, and a sense of a fair and equitable arrangement with other family members. At least as long as these realignments of household duties seemed temporary, men usually had little to say about the changes, either as significantly positive or negative experiences.

In this chapter I turn, in some depth, to the experiences of three respondents, a white man, Michael, a black man, Daniel, and a white woman, Colleen, who all rejected a de facto transition into full-time reproductive labor as a result of their job losses. Two of these participants had a post-feminist perspective on unpaid labor, while one, Daniel, had a traditional outlook; and yet, as I will show, many of their logics were similar. I examine their experiences of increased and unwanted reproductive labor and their reasons for rejecting it in order to show the difficulties and limitations to attempting to ungender housework in the context of austerity and a neoliberal market. Despite their different “gender ideology” approaches, the gendering of this labor not only withstands the pressures of labor rearrangements in response to economic distress, but shows how, despite its explicit, post-feminist, nontraditional framing among most of the participants, it can also work to reaffirm and reinvent gendered assumptions about housework and ideas about masculinity and femininity, and women and men.
“That old traditional type…”

In one of the earliest interviews our team performed, in November of 2012, 31-year-old Daniel seemed an exemplary victim of the mancession discourse, a man who was coping with a sudden and profound shift in gendered-labor experience resulting from the loss of his job. Daniel had worked for years as a dispatcher at a municipal utility provider. He made a steady, moderate income, and his girlfriend, whom he lived with, stayed home and took care of the house, the cooking, and the cleaning, a division of labor that he called their “arrangement.” But losing his job, their sole source of income, ruined that arrangement. This was a failure he was desperate to correct, as he told my colleague:

Daniel: So my arrangement…yeah… I am unable to make my arrangement.
There ain’t no nice clothes or steak in the refrigerator. I’m not meeting my arrangement.

Interviewer: So what does that mean?

Daniel: She’s unable to meet her arrangement. You know why?

Interviewer: Why?

Daniel: Because she has to do more. I mean she gotta cook, clean and everything else, but she gotta do things to make money. So she’s gonna be just as tired as I am. So our arrangement changed. You know. And it sort of is my fault. So we gotta fight to try and get our arrangement back. I’m not gonna put stress on her because she’s out there doing what she has to, to make things happen.
Daniel explained that despite having an unspecified disability which she was processing social security claims around, his girlfriend had been doing any odd job she could to bring in cash for them: “She changes people’s oil and stuff like that man, she’ll drive people to the store for little money and stuff like that.”

My colleague asked whether Daniel’s role had changed as well, and whether he was now doing more around the house:

Daniel: I help with everything. At home I cook. I clean too. You know I do whatever I could when I’m at home, when it’s not done.

Interviewer: And did you do that before?

Daniel: No, I didn’t, I didn’t touch any of that stuff.

Interviewer: Was she not working when you were?

Daniel: Nah, she wasn’t working.

Interviewer: Okay, gotcha.

Daniel: I didn’t want her to.

Interviewer: Okay, gotcha. Why is that?

Daniel: She didn’t want to either. But I said I would rather…I like a traditional type, that old traditional stuff, that’s what I like. If she wanna work that’s fine, but you don’t have to, especially if it’s causing a certain amount of stress.

Daniel was careful to establish that though he knew he was describing an arrangement that would surely be seen as traditional, the division of labor prior to his job loss had been something they both wanted, rather than something he had imposed on his
girlfriend. He had not wanted her to work, and she had not wanted to work, and this had spared them both some stress in the past. Daniel was open about just how far the stress of his job loss had affected their relationship. When the interviewer asked whether the disruption of their arrangement was taking a toll on their relationship, particularly intimacy, and Daniel responded, “It’s just not really there. Neither one of us really want to… I like having sex with my girl, but I just don’t feel, you know the feeling I am talking about… you know?” The rearrangement of roles and subsequent crisis of identity was felt so deeply that it was affecting their sex lives. The interviewer prompted him to explain further.

Daniel explained, this was not just affecting his interest in his girlfriend sexually, but he worried the division of labor left her actually disgusted with him. As Daniel said,

And for her, she’s old school, so for her to take care of the house, she almost feels so bad, when she had a long day and things is messed up and I’m cleaning the house up. You can see she almost looks disgusted. She’ll come in and try and help me, you know? And it’s cool, I ain’t done nothing all day. So you can see where it’s just affected both of us we don’t feel like we are doing what we should be doing or could have done. It’s just turned everything kind of upside down.”

It is not clear from the transcript exactly what he thought his girlfriend was disgusted by. Was it the sight of him performing domestic work? The fact that he was incompetent at the work? Or was she disgusted at the sight of the house without her there to take care of it? Whatever the cause, Daniel was certain that
the end of their household arrangement was having far-reaching effects on their relationship, and it had certainly made him self-conscious about the way his girlfriend saw him.

Daniel’s sense that this new arrangement had turned everything “upside down,” was predicted by many pieces on the so-called mancession. Daniel articulated a clear affinity for what feminists have critiqued as a family-wage economic system and clear anxieties about its absence from his own life. Daniel, however, was rare among those in the sample. Perhaps the gender-mainstreaming of the post-feminist era has made more men aware of a stigma attached to expressing beliefs about traditional gender roles and their desire for a separate-spheres division of labor in their relationships. This may have been exacerbated when these men sat down with women interviewers who clearly themselves worked outside the home. Other men who felt this way likely did not increase their unpaid work at all, like Daniel did, and thus, did not talk about unpaid work or the gendered division of labor in their interviews.

But regardless of the reason for Daniel’s exceptionalism in the sample, his exceptionalism indicated a different and perhaps more complex story about gender in the recession than contained in the mancession and “end of men” narratives. There were a number of men who did talk about their feelings about housework and childcare and other unpaid tasks during unemployment, but they did so in very different ways. Despite the fact that Daniel’s articulation of such a feeling of upheaval, a crisis in gender roles so deep that it threatened even his and his girlfriend’s sexual relationship, proved to be surprisingly rare among the unemployed men in the study, it showed some similarities to
much more progressive, post-feminist experiences of housework after job loss, among both men and women.

Progressive masculinity at work in the home

In 2005, Michael, a white man in his early thirties, finished a master’s degree in political science and quickly thereafter found a job as an assistant to an agricultural lobbyist to the state government. He made what he reported was a modest, but comfortable salary of around $36,000 per year, plus good benefits. He was unmarried, had no children, and enjoyed the perks that came with his political connections. “I mean, the job was great – in some respects, it was really fun,” Michael told me. But the job also compromised some of his self-described “progressive” values, and he didn’t always feel good about doing it.

I learned some stuff. I also learned a lot as somebody who teaches political science and somebody who studied it and everything. I realized I wasn’t really a part of the solution, I was a part of the problem – I was writing legislation while I was there, I was doing – but I had box seats at the [local university’s] basketball games. You know? So it’s one of those things, it’s like – box seats, hurting small farmers – as I look back on it, I was kind of a shill for corporate agriculture. That’s all they do over there.

In retrospect, Michael vocalizes a strong ambivalence about what to think of the job he now considers his last good job. On the one hand, what he was doing went against his own ethics, helping to write legislation, a role he thought should be reserved for
elected officials, for instance. On the other hand, he felt important and he had access to fun and leisure he would not have had otherwise.

In 2007, Michael felt he was thriving at his job. Often, clients would come to him directly for help, because they knew he could be counted on. But such requests had made him worry that his boss was beginning to feel threatened by his success. He told clients they needed to go through his boss first, who would likely pass the assignment off to him eventually, anyway. Though he had these concerns about workplace politics, he hadn’t expected to be let go as suddenly as he was. One morning his boss invited him into her office and informed him that his position was being eliminated immediately, in order to make room for departmental restructuring.

Though he was angry and discouraged about being let go, especially because he felt he was being targeted for being too good at his job, he was at first confident he would find comparable work quickly. He was well liked in both private and public sector workplaces linked to his lobbying job and several friends assured him they would help place him somewhere. But over time, each of these promises proved to be fruitless. One friend had gone so far as discussing salary and starting dates with him in an interview, only to give the job to a family member without letting him know the position had been filled until Michael called to find out the status of the job. He worried that his open campaigning for a Democratic candidate for governor at the time had become more common knowledge in his field and sullied his reputation in corporate agriculture. Whatever the reason, he quickly went from confident to desperate.
Just as Michael began looking for work outside the agricultural policy sector in 2008, the economy went into crisis, and he was suddenly one of countless others looking for a job. After a bad break-up with his girlfriend, and months of joblessness, Michael moved back in with his parents and began working odd jobs, mostly in retail. His mom and stepdad were very supportive, and he was able to live with them without paying rent. He didn’t have to buy groceries or do much else outside his job search. The move back to a family home bought him some time, and eased his financial worries.

In the meantime, he reconnected with a friend from high school who is now his wife, a public high school teacher who owned a home in the city. He told her almost immediately about his underemployment when they began dating. As their relationship became more serious, she had concerns about money, and how they would pay the bills when they were married, but she was also understanding, especially because unemployment was spiking throughout the nation and she knew many people who were going through the same thing, Michael told me. Though together they had some significant student debt and a mortgage to worry about, her steady income and good benefits reassured them. Plus, Michael was managing to find some low-wage work to help contribute to their household.

Since 2007 Michael had worked so many jobs that he could not keep track of them—remembering various jobs as we talked, when particular questions jogged his memory. “You pick up all these weird skills,” he explained, “so I am a certified barista in addition to all sorts of other stuff.” He told me about being a barista as he was listing some of the worst jobs, in this case, his stint as the manager of a coffee stand inside a
discount, big-box retail store. He had been thrilled to get the job at first, starting at $14 an hour, “which for retail is amazing,” he told me. But just after getting comfortable in the job he learned the company had created an internal incentive for high turnover in his position; fellow employees told him that the human resources and store managers were paid a bonus if a full-time employee quit before working 90 days, the point at which they were to receive healthcare benefits.

He explained, “[T]he store manager and the human resources manager in the stores had sat down and figured out what areas in the store were not essential as far as having stability. The people are always gonna come in and buy coffee. It doesn’t matter who’s running the place--the same thing with the food court and some of the other minor areas in the store. So, those areas had high employee and managerial turnover because, at about the second month, the resources manager just started being a dick. He was like, ‘You have to take your break now; you need to go to the bathroom now.’” Michael laughed at the absurdity of the boss’s micromanagement. “I’m like, ‘Jim, I’m a thirty-year-old man -- I think I can handle going when I need to use the restroom.’”

I asked whether he really thought this was an attempt to make him quit, whether his staff had been right that this was part of a clear strategy to create high turnover in his position. Michael had no doubts about what had happened. After frequent badgering and condescension from the store manager while other employees were around, Michael had said, in frustration, “You know, I’ve done other jobs—this is just, you know, a thing that I’m doing for money right now.” The store manager replied (in front of other staff, Michael noted), “Well, if you were any good at those, you wouldn’t be here.” The insult
was the last straw for Michael, and he quit after that shift, even though he knew this was exactly what the manager had wanted. For Michael, $14 an hour plus benefits did not make up for the personal costs of humiliation.

At times, in addition to working in retail, he also took on a couple political science classes as an adjunct professor at a nearby community college (eventually enrollments dropped too low and he couldn’t get classes), and briefly worked as a social studies teacher at a Jewish private school, a temporary, part-time job that had barely paid enough to make the work worth it. He also became a volunteer for a struggling inner-city church trying to run an after-school program for neighborhood kids. This was not only a way to spend his free time, but also, he hoped, a way to build a network that could help get him a job—a well-paying job but one that would allow him to do good in the world and be true to himself politically more than the lobbying job had.

Then in 2013, Michael and his wife had a baby, a boy, who was eight months old when we first talked. I asked him whether they talked about his employment or finances when they decided to have a baby. He told me he had asked his wife, “How are we gonna pay for his college?” She started laughing and asked, “How are we gonna pay for ours?” The anecdote served as Michael’s answer to my question. Of course they had thought about it and talked about it, but they did not feel their financial problems should stop them from continuing with their lives as they had wanted them to play out, from having the kind of family they had hoped to have together. Despite the financial questions, a mortgage, their student loans, and Michael’s low income, they feared they were both getting too old to have a child and should do it before it was too late. Additionally, his
wife suffers from rheumatoid arthritis, and she wanted to have a baby before both pregnancy and parenting were too difficult on her body.

The baby had changed how Michael used his time. His wife went back to full-time work as soon as her maternity leave had ended. With only a small stream of income coming in from Michael’s work in retail, childcare was an expensive consideration. While Michael worked part-time, they could afford a babysitter two days a week, and Michael’s mother was able to watch the baby another day during the week. When his wife was home from work, they split childcare pretty evenly. But Michael did all the cooking—he joked that he wouldn’t “let her” do the cooking because he was much better at it—and a good amount of cleaning. It wasn’t until I had deliberately asked about their childcare arrangements or who cooked or who cleaned that he told me about his role in this labor. He spoke about these arrangements in a matter-of-fact way.

I asked Michael how he felt about the current division of labor in his family. “My whole issue is pride. You know? I don’t have to worry as much about keeping a roof over my head or eating or feeding the kid and everything like that. So, I’ve been relatively lucky there. All I have to worry about is being frustrated and ticked off a lot. Um, you know, but when you couple that with, you know, crushing poverty, lack of education, lack of skills and everything, I can understand why people are—you know—.” He lost his train of thought as he considered people with much worse situations than his, many of whom he had met during his volunteer work with the church and spoke about at length at various points in the interview. He clearly felt hesitant to discuss his feelings about his unemployment, worrying that such feelings paled in comparison to material
disadvantages others were facing, as he pointed out to me. “So it affects your pride?” I asked, hoping to encourage him to say more about himself.

“Yeah, well you know, I’m a progressive guy, but I’m still a guy, so I’m genetically kind of wired to want to be like, you know, the guy in charge.” Michael’s confession of angst about his joblessness had quickly turned into a statement on masculinity and the limits of what he considered his relatively progressive masculinity. “And so, you don’t like having to ask your wife if you can spend money,” he added. He clarified that he doesn’t actually have to ask her for money. He can spend freely, if he wants to, but he doesn’t want to. I asked whether his underemployment had caused problems at all for their relationship. He said it had caused tensions at times, but was reluctant to give specific examples about these tensions. But getting a job would have a very positive impact on their relationship, he assured me: “I’ll feel a lot better about what I’m doing.”

Michael at first had seemed the embodiment of enlightened masculinity, far different from the self-presentation of Daniel, who was undergoing a true personal and relationship crisis because of new jobs—checking his white privilege as he complained about the job market, bragging about taking on all the cooking in his household, explaining that he was looking for a job that would allow him to make a more positive contribution than his job with the lobbyist had. But in Michael’s insistence that he was “still a guy,” I realized his self-identification as a progressive and his comfort with cooking and caring did not preclude entirely the kinds of anxieties Daniel had about whether he was fulfilling his roles. What was causing someone so self-aware and
reflexive about his positionality and how he was perceived by me to turn to this trope of injured masculinity in order to explain his unhappiness and his dissatisfaction?

I considered the changes in how Michael had related to the world, to other people in his daily life since 2007, from his last stable job in what seemed at the time would be his career-field, where he was gifted free seats to basketball games, to being humiliated by managers in front of others about his abilities as a worker, from being someone considered so effective at his job that clients wanted to circumvent the work processes in place in order to receive his help, to being more valuable to his bosses if he quit than if he stayed. A sense of dampened pride in having to rely on someone else to meet your material needs was surely an expected and understandable response. Indeed, his humiliation in the sphere of paid labor had produced in him a refusal to continue in this way, even if it meant less money. As Michael explained it, this response was something primitive and inherent, something hidden deep inside him that could not be repressed by the most progressive of politics, and he had the language of manhood at his disposal to explain it.

“There’s a nobility in that...”

About ten months after Michael told me about the effects of unemployment on his sense of masculinity, I met with him again, hoping to hear that his job fortunes had changed. A couple months after we talked the first time, he had gotten a job, a dream job, as he saw it, designing curriculum for a workforce development company. But just five weeks after he started, he was laid off—no, he corrected himself, not laid off. The departure had been
reported by the company as, “termination with cause but through no fault of his own,” which fortunately qualified him for unemployment benefits. We laughed together about the opaque, bureaucratic description of his termination, an explanation that confused more than it cleared up, neither faulting the employer or employee for the termination, as though it were simply unavoidable. After he had finished the first major curriculum he had been hired to design, his boss had decided to take the organization in a different direction, and Michael’s services were no longer needed. That was the only explanation he was given for the sudden change.

He had a few leads when we met again, several months after this job loss, but he had settled back into his more domestic routine. He received unemployment payments, and would for a couple more months. This fact made it so it was not worth it to him to go back to working retail, since his income there would disqualify him from the higher unemployment payments. He took care of his son during the day, though he still had a babysitter coming two days a week because it seemed to be good for his son’s development. While his son napped and whenever else he could find time, he did what he called, “cash work.” He paused before proceeding to tell me he had been hand-painting game pieces for fantasy, tabletop games and selling them online for a bit of extra, non-taxed income, meaning income that would not be subtracted from his unemployment payments.

His desire for a full-time job in his field had not waned. The game-piece work was “better than flipping burgers,” but he was not enjoying it. It had ruined what was once his hobby, he told me. He was, at the moment, deep in the process of applying to a
national educational organization where he would work on curriculum development on global affairs for children and teenagers. He was very hopeful that he would find work soon, and work that was meaningful, hopefully teaching. I asked whether he had any intention of returning to the classroom, since he had worked as a teacher at a community college and at a private high school in the past. He said he wanted to work to make kids’ lives better, but not necessarily to work with kids on a daily basis. It wasn’t for him. I asked whether this translated to the time he spent with his own son. He liked spending time with his son, he said, but did not want to do it full-time. “When my wife starts talking about me becoming a stay-at-home dad and joining dads’ groups, I am not down with that at all,” he said.

I asked whether his wife had put this forward as serious option for them.

Michael said, “Oh, she’s completely serious. I’m like, ‘You’re out of your mind. I would go nuts.’”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because, well, I think I have more to offer to the world than just staying home and taking care of my son. I know there’s a nobility in that, but you know, I can do stuff that pays and I would like to do that,” Michael said. Michael articulated two critiques of unpaid domestic work in his answer to my question, while acknowledging that he saw it as possessing some nobility. Noble as it may be, what it lacked was twofold: an opportunity to contribute adequately to the world beyond his private family and monetary compensation.
Nancy Fraser argues that feminism itself has led in part to the notion that paid work is the ideal endeavor for modern men and women:

Endowing their daily struggles with an ethical meaning, the feminist romance attracts women at both ends of the social spectrum: at one end, the female cadres of the professional middle classes, determined to crack the glass ceiling; at the other end, the female temps, part-timers, low-wage service workers, domestics [...], seeking not only income and material security, but also dignity, self-betterment, and liberation from traditional authority. At both ends, the dream of women’s emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation. Once the centerpiece of a radical critique of androcentrism, it serves today to intensify capitalism’s valorization of waged labor (2014: 221).

Of course, these participants were speaking about their own experiences, and not attempting to make grand declarations about the normative value of housework or care work or any other kind of work. That is in part what makes these kinds of statements when held by so many individuals in such different life situations so powerful. They appear to be that much more solidly common-sense beliefs built on lived experience, rather than appearing to be ideas that only seem true in particular economic conditions where people are powerless over their lives and what kind of work they can do that will be rewarded. The valorization of waged labor was perhaps implicit in many of these rejections of full-time housework and childcare, in suggestions that there was a more fulfilling, more liberating, and
possibly less exploitative life in the job market than outside of it. But the valorization was not uncritical, even among those who said they would rather be getting paid than working in the private sphere. Each and every one of the respondents who described a strong desire to get back to paid work as soon as possible had a host of critiques about their past workplaces and anxieties about the future of labor.

Still, it speaks volumes of the devaluation of unpaid reproductive labor that they all remained steadfast against performing unpaid domestic labor in any long-term arrangement, even if they had working partners who could meet their basic financial needs. Rather than softening perceptions of those who performed unpaid work full-time, the experience of performing it during the recession had the opposite effect on these participants: it reiterated to them or showed them for the first time that it was something unrewarding, that these tasks should belong to a different type of person—for Daniel, it was a task for women, for Michael it was a task belonging to more noble people, either more noble women or perhaps to more progressive men than he was, and for Colleen, it was a role situated firmly in the past, for women of a bygone era.

Unpaid labor as bygone

Colleen was an unemployed graphic designer whom a colleague of mine first talked to in 2012. Colleen was a white woman, and a relatively high-income participant in the sample. She had lost her job and then had the difficult task of making ends meet on just
her husband’s meager salary as an adjunct professor at a local community college. She had been the main breadwinner, and she suddenly found herself earning nothing. She had previously worked for a cosmetics company, and though she was hired for her skills as a graphic designer, she had been doing many other jobs at the company before it was sold and she was laid off in 2010. Everyone worked hard at this company, including her. She said it wasn’t uncommon to see an ambulance outside her workplace to pick up someone who was suffering from anxiety or exhaustion.

While unemployed, Colleen felt she’d had no choice but to cook and clean more, not only because she was home, but because she felt someone had to take charge of the household, while she and her husband struggled to pay their bills. She told my colleague:

Colleen: Yeah I mean since it’s….I am home more….yeah…I am the dishwasher, the cleaner, the laundress, the person who makes appointments and mails and writes all the bills. I’m like the housemistress, and it’s not a role I particularly enjoy.

Interviewer: Can you go into that? Like why don’t you enjoy it?

Colleen: Because I like designing things better and because…I don’t know. There is an element to it that makes me appreciate what my mother must have gone through the entire time we were growing up. But everyone just sort of takes that for granted, that dinner is going to magically appear on the table at 6:00 every night and my clothes are magically cleaned. It’s kind of an invisible thing to be, to have that role. It’s not very well
appreciated and it doesn’t— it’s kind of a treachery. It’s not fun. It’s nice to look around and see a clean house but I’d rather be working.

Like Michael, Colleen did not deny that there were positive aspects to being at home, like taking pride in a clean house and dinner being on the table, but it was not equal to working for pay. Just as Michael did not want to be a stay-at-home dad if he could help it, Colleen could not envision being a “housemistress” long-term. Colleen’s use of the terms “housemistress” as well as “laundress” emphasized that in part what she finds objectionable about this work is that it is old-fashioned, antiquated, and feminized, not to mention, low-class. Just as these are words from another time, there is something representing servitude, rather than familiality, in such titles that she could not bear. Even being in the role temporarily, she explained, makes her sympathetic to women of the past who toiled in less enlightened times, like her mother. Furthermore, by using the words “housemistress,” and “laundress” to describe the feeling she had about doing the work and not enjoying it, Colleen suggested that the lack of pay for the labor was not the only thing she found degrading about it. In fact, “housemistress” and “laundress,” though antiquated titles for the roles, were likely paid positions that were quite different from the role Colleen’s mother was in. But to Colleen, they were undesirable jobs, perhaps simply because of how little they have paid, but also perhaps because of their social insignificance, and because those who performed these jobs historically were by and large low-class women, women of color, historically black women and more recently Latinas (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007).
I followed up with her in 2014 to find out how her job search had gone and how she felt about these issues about 18 months after her first interview. She was working part-time as a graphic designer. Though it was about half the pay she was used to in her previous job, and she continued to apply to full-time jobs in her field, she was relatively happy with how things were for the time being. For one thing, she said, she had time to do all kinds of things she hadn’t when she was working full-time. In so many ways, Colleen’s description of unemployment in her follow-up interview was much like Laura’s or Brie’s from chapter three, where time off was badly needed, and unemployment proved to be an opportunity to return to a balance that had been lost in the hector of an important job. Was it possible someone with such a diametrically opposed view of unpaid work was nonetheless finding pleasure and opportunity in her unpaid time?

When I asked her what kinds of things she was doing now with her extra time, her answer took me by surprise, given her past complaints. “Oh, you know,” she said, “cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, and basic stuff that it does just take a chunk of time to take care of the basics. I’ve also traveled a little, but with not a lot of money floating around, it’s kind of hard to—well, with the future being so ambiguous, it’s hard to spend money.” I was surprised that the things she was enjoying having the time to do were not primarily things like traveling and other hobbies or forms of leisure, but chores. Perhaps she was more like Brie and Laura than I’d thought. What had created this shift in sensibility towards housework?

“Now, remind me what your household situation is?” I asked her, half-suspecting I’d somehow made a mistake and confused Colleen with another participant who had
scoffed at laundry and housework as beneath her and undeserving of her time during her initial interview.

“It has changed,” she said. “My husband and I owned a house. I have left him.”

“Really? How recent was this?” I asked.

“That was about seven or eight months ago. Just a lot of things about being unemployed really drove home some points about my living situation—that the onus was on me not only to be the major breadwinner, to do the heavy lifting when it came to all of the household things, from paying the insurance, to running all the errands, I mean, too much was on me. And it was kind of impractical when you’re already uprooted from a job to further uproot yourself. But I’m stronger on my own,” she explained. For Colleen, the disproportionate amount of unpaid labor she was performing, in addition to her role in earning an income, had revealed to her larger problems in her marriage and larger concerns about her partner. As she explained that she was now stronger alone, she performed a sort of cost-benefit analysis of the marriage for me. While leaving her husband while she was unemployed might have appeared irrational, she acknowledged, as though it would make her troubles more difficult, it had not. Ultimately, she had been giving much more than she felt she was receiving in her marriage, and the question of domestic labor encapsulated this imbalance. I asked Colleen how leaving her husband had affected her financially. She reported that she was much better off single, even working part time, than she had been with him. The debts were his, and anyway, in their best-earning years, she had earned more than twice what he had as an adjunct professor. What’s more, she told me disdainfully, he never sought any means to supplement his
income in academia, even while she toiled in her full-time job, doing whatever jobs were asked of her in order to maintain their lifestyle. Taken together, his lack of motivation either to maintain the household or to support it financially had been too much for Colleen.

Here’s how Colleen’s calculations had gone: If her marital household were to require at least double the domestic work, clerical work, and errand-running of an individual’s household, and, if her husband was going to contribute next to nothing to these endeavors, and do nothing to make up for it in the form of income, then divorce was a common-sense decision. It would almost instantly reduce her burden. Leaving her husband was a move toward increased stability, relief, and self-advocacy.

After we discussed the specifics of her divorce and how it was affecting her finances, I told her that before I came into the interview I had looked back at her interview with my colleague from the previous year. I mentioned that one quote that stood out to me was her calling herself a housemistress and not liking it. “I’m wondering if that outlook has changed at all or if you feel very much the same, like you’re eager to get back to a workplace?” I asked.

“I like order, and I like cleanliness a lot. I don’t mind doing those things. I specifically don’t mind picking up after myself. I didn’t have children for a reason,” Colleen laughed. “When I’m picking up after others and not feeling particularly appreciated, then I’m not so happy. But houses need to be cleaned, and laundry needs to be done, and I love cooking. I mean there are certain things I love, but no one likes to do those things without being appreciated.” Without a husband who did not pull his own
weight or thank her for the weight that she pulled, the burden of the labor itself suddenly seemed lighter. Colleen was clearer now on what had been wrong with doing the domestic work before, what about it had made her feel like a “housemistress,” whereas it had now become something she was grateful to have more time for. Even cooking, a skill she loved, had become something she disliked doing when it was not appreciated and when it was paired with disproportionate role in familial labor as a whole.

Since leaving her husband, Colleen had moved into a small apartment with a roommate, a friend she had known for years and felt very comfortable living with now. I asked how they divide up household chores in their apartment. She explained that they both took initiative to help out, and that there were no conflicts around housework, because they each felt the other’s contribution was fair and were both good at gauging each other’s tolerance for mess. “We both just sort of do what needs to be done when it needs to be done,” she said, shrugging. Of course, the level of individual initiative and intuition involved in creating this peaceable division of housework was far from being the non-issue it seemed to her. What she was actually describing as necessary to creating a dynamic that was so tolerable for her (and she assumed for her roommate) was a high level of self-motivation, care, connectedness, and compassion on the part of her roommate, all of which were absent from her unhappy marriage.

What mattered for Colleen though was that housework had become a non-issue in this new household context. Her thoughts on housework underlined the point that unpaid reproductive labor is not inherently either rewarding or oppressive, but that its character is derived from the set of social circumstances surrounding it. Colleen’s changing
feelings about housework paralleled Michael’s feelings about his hobby of painting tabletop game pieces. As long as he could work on his own time and do the painting for his own enjoyment, the craft was a hobby. But when Michael was forced to negotiate this hobby with pay and with care for his child, the hobby was ruined. On the one hand, he explained this rejection of his life as a work-from-home dad as a result of who he was. Other people were nobler and the work was fine for them. But when it came down to it, he admitted he did not feel fulfilled in his non-traditional role.

But Michael’s answer here also sounded very similar to answers given by women participants, like Colleen and like others. Liz, a black woman in her 30s who worked for an insurance company until the economic crisis, told a colleague that her husband had liked her increased involvement with their children and around the house since she lost her job, but that she was still eager to get back to work. My colleague asked her whether this was causing any problems between them. Liz laughed: “Yes. Because he wants me to stay home and be a housewife. No, I’m not built like that. The whole thing is that’s not me.”

Liz and Michael both had spouses who saw the benefits of having their partners stay at home full-time instead of returning to paid work. Both responded to these ideas as though they were absurd, because at some level, this was just not who they were or what they wanted or who they wanted to be—stay-at-home dad, housewife, or housemistress. Though Liz’s and Colleen’s arguments against housewifery were less immediately reactionary than Michael’s admission about his threatened masculinity or Daniel’s anger about his broken arrangement with his girlfriend, gender and the idea that housework
represents an unwanted, undesirable femininity is nonetheless present in their opinions about performing domestic work and childcare full-time, instead of working outside the home. Liz rejected not necessarily the particulars of the labor she had done since losing her insurance job, but her husband’s desire for her to be a housewife. Her declaration: “The whole thing is, that’s not me,” draws attention not to a question of what activities she would or would not like to do but instead to her identity as a woman—a woman who is just not a housewife.

Colleen and Liz embrace a sort of post-feminist femininity, one not content to serve and clean and have one’s efforts confined to the home, just like Laura and Brie articulated. But Colleen and Liz saw little to be gained from an even temporary foray into unpaid servitude for others. All four of these women, two of them white, and two of them black, showed that they were quite capable of deconstructing the meaning of gender roles, of drawing attention to what those roles were supposed to be traditionally, and defining themselves in opposition to those traditional roles. For Liz and Colleen, the problem with unpaid domestic work was that they felt it had the potential to define them, to make them housewives, mistresses, laundresses, to erase their other identities, their statuses as successful career women. Was it the particular world view of their husbands that had made them fear being taken over by these roles, that if she didn’t get back to work, Liz’s husband would see her as his housewife and not the person she was, or that Colleen had become invisible and unappreciated by her ex-husband because she no longer worked? They seemed to be responding to a threatening identity that came from somewhere far beyond their immediate lives, a force of erasure and devaluation that
might be contextual, but was certainly bigger than one or two potentially sexist men. And while they danced around this reality of the classed, racialized, and sexualized devaluation of domestic work and workers in their stories, their post-feminist self-making steered them from structural critique and toward individual problem-solving. If Colleen and Liz felt the erasures of housewifery creeping into their identities as fully realized, successful women, they had to change their own circumstances, to leave their husbands or take a job or do anything but remain people others might see and treat like housewives.

How different was this fear of domestication from Daniel’s earlier frustration at the loss of his and his girlfriend’s “arrangement” with one another, when he lost his job and his girlfriend had to work for pay? Or how different was their fear from Michael’s insistence that though he was a progressive man, he was still a man, and that made him dissatisfied with being a stay-at-home dad? All these participants were navigating a post-feminist, neoliberal landscape where the most important attributes a person could have were individual will power, self-advocacy, and personal responsibility, and where ultimately only they as individuals could be blamed for the failure to negotiate and live up to a suitable division of labor within a relationship or for failing to end a relationship where their partner would not cooperate or hold up their end of the bargain.

Daniel’s, Colleen’s, and Michael’s cases illustrate the complexity sometimes lost in the feminist and sociological debate about housework, its devaluation, and the continued salience of gender ideology. Only Daniel explained his rejection of housework and his overall desperation in the face of unemployment in terms of a desire for a clear, traditional, gender division of labor. Michael and especially Colleen sought to undermine
traditional gendered assumptions about who should do what labor, and they turned instead to their own personalities and personal preferences to explain their unhappiness with it. If Brie and Laura saw housework as an individualized opportunity for investment and self-improvement, then Michael and Colleen see it as an individualized burden—not one that is bad, in general, but bad for them, in their circumstances, at that particular moment. The structural individualization of unpaid work has individualized individuals’ responses, so that the ambivalence and even negative feelings the performance of housework produces are read through the lens of personality, rather than as evidence of the unjust system of labor and reward in which the participants find themselves.
Sheila had graduated college and was still unemployed eight months later. As the daughter of Ghanaian immigrants who had, as she said, built themselves up from nothing, Sheila knew that not only hard work, but also a certain sort of class mobility were expected of her:

[B]ack in Ghana there’s not that many resources going on, many funds, and you’re able to come in America, the Land of Opportunities. We may be in a recession, but it’s nothing compared to back over there. So, my dad is looking at this like, ‘Okay, you’re still blessed because the end of the day, you will find a job.’ [...] I keep on thinking he had way more struggles than me. He had way more bumps than me. His childhood was not that great. He probably wasn’t able to get a Bachelor’s and I have it. I have to keep strong. I can’t complain to him, be like ‘Oh, my God, I can’t find a job.’ I’m sure he wasn’t able to find a job at first but he came here.

So yeah, [finding work] is possible. It’s hard but things are possible.

Sheila thought it was clear the conditions she was in could not be worse than those her parents had faced as immigrants (she was born while her parents lived in Italy, and emigrated with her family to the United States as a child), and yet, here she was, without a job and deeply in debt, despite her many blessings and her hard work. Sheila graduated
from a public university in Ohio with student debt, and lots of it: “We can say less than 50 grand, let’s say 40, between 40 and 45.” Sheila’s debt was 10-15 thousand dollars more than the average student debt among those graduating in the United States in 2012, though students of color do take on more student debt, on average, than their white peers. Sheila graduated with a degree in business, a major that she and her parents thought to be a risky major--her parents had advised her to study nursing, but she hadn’t liked it and felt she should be more ambitious. She wanted to be an executive, possibly in the fashion industry. But with no connections in the field and graduating into an economy with continuously high unemployment, she was unable to find work.

With no income and debts to repay, she moved back in with her family. She was able to defer some loans, because of her unemployment, but not on others. Occasionally, she was forced to ask her parents for help with minimum payments, $50 or $100 a month. This was the only form of financial support they were able to give, other than giving her a place to stay and food to eat. She wondered, should she continue to hold out for a job in her field or go to graduate school and incur more debt, with the hopes that a graduate degree would open more job options? Or should she take any job she could so she could make those payments? Her debt shaped not only her immediate behaviors, but also what she saw as her options for the future.

Perhaps the greatest surge of research related to the financial crisis has concerned the increasingly significant role of debt in creating global economic instability, as well as in shaping individuals’ job prospects and future wealth accumulation. It may be intuitive that households with the least amount of debt and the greatest amount of wealth can
cushion themselves in many ways to maintain, and as previous chapters have shown, even increase support for social reproductive processes within the family during economic crisis. But what comes of those who are least able to lean on the wealth of themselves or their families for support when they lose access to income and employment? And with access to social welfare support more constrained than in recent decades, what strategies of survival can participants cobble together? Certainly, homelessness is one outcome, but there are also other last-ditch familial supports that some participants can conjure when in precarious positions. Among several participants, what came as a result of this lack of access to wealth was not only a significant decline in the expected standard of living, but also a return to and rededication to family labor as a means of survival. As stories like Sheila’s show, along with this turn to the family for help came a new kind of mounting debt, an indebtedness to the family.

According to the Institute on Assets and Social Policy, who tracked the same black and white households over 25 years, the racial wealth gap has nearly tripled, from $85,000 in 1984 to $236,500 in 2009. The Institute cites the causes of the expansion of the racial wealth gap as years of home ownership, household income, unemployment, college education, and “inheritance, financial supports by families or friends, and preexisting family wealth.” What is clear from these studies is that the absence of access to wealth through familial structures makes it more difficult to attain or accumulate wealth, and that, likely due to historical, institutionalized racism, black families have much less access to wealth than their white counterparts.
Sheila’s story illustrates the cyclical nature or reproduction of this wealth inequality: those without wealth cannot pay for their children’s education, and so their children go into debt to pay for schooling, ultimately affecting the child’s ability to accumulate wealth of his/her own, since they spend some of their most important earning years paying back debt instead of accumulating wealth and assets. The history of structural racism and explicit barriers to wealth accumulation among black and immigrant families makes the story of the Great Recession one of particular precarity for these families. Sheila’s story also highlights something even deeper about this process of debt begetting more debt across generations experiencing relative wealth scarcity. Sheila and the other participants I discuss at length in this chapter articulate the same neoliberal ideologies of self-efficacy, of a society that will reward those who put in effort, of work-life balance as something within the grasp of an individual who plays her cards right, and unpaid labor as an investment that will hopefully have future payoffs, as the previously discussed participants who had much more economic security and much clearer objective and subjective benefits from unpaid labor. In these cases, however, the participants who mobilize these neoliberal narratives are struggling and their struggle is made more difficult because of their unpaid laboring. These narratives are mobilized by both parties to reassure them that they should remain hopeful about the future and put hope above fears they feel, but in the case of the participants in this chapter, these narratives are much more likely to increase their own self-blame and feelings of personal failure or shortcomings, because the material circumstances of their unpaid labor are so different.
A few white participants in the study also experienced situations in which they had to perform more reproductive labor after job loss in exchange for care and resources from their families. One white woman, who was losing her eyesight and had struggled to find work that paid her a decent amount and would accommodate her evolving disability, had moved in with her sister, where she helped to care for the sister’s autistic son. Another white woman explained that she was frustrated by the expectation that she had to babysit her sister’s children on a moment’s notice while living under her roof, and complained that she could scarcely find time to think about jobs and her future because of this expectation. But in this chapter, I respond in particular to the calls from Ferguson and McNally (2015a) and Katz (2001) to consider the globalized dynamics of racial inequality that shape the terrain of global social reproduction, even from a very localized space in the United States. I focus on how groups with histories of social marginalization, in addition to their economic precarity during unemployment, understand and cope with these dynamics.

As I will highlight in these stories, race does not just matter in correlation with the absence of wealth, but affects where and what unpaid labor these participants do, as well as how these participants think of this labor and talk about it. Furthermore, black participants who rely on family members, who themselves suffer from a lack of wealth face a double burden of poverty, due to the effects of segregation in urban areas like Columbus. These participants all faced the economic crisis with little financial support from family, but were able to return to live with their parents as long as they provided familial care in return. Their physical return to wealth-scarce family homes was
accompanied by a series of limitations linked to the geographic areas where those homes were located, which white respondents did not face. This move meant worse schools, worse job prospects, limited access to healthy food and groceries, and often limited access to the rest of the city.

In addition to accounting for where social reproduction occurs, in this chapter, I consider why it occurs in these places, and between particular people as a result of personal histories and the legacies of colonization and structural inequality, carried on primarily through family inheritance. As I will demonstrate, the on-going legacies of stark economic inequality across race, particularly between blacks and whites in the city of Columbus, shape the social reproductive experiences of people of color facing job loss or serious debt, particularly black Americans and immigrants of color like Sheila, and do so in ways that have the potential to even further deepen economic inequalities between black and white Americans.

The story of Sheila’s family’s immigration, followed by frustrated dreams of mobility once settled in the United States, reflect the racialization of responsibility for reproduction under neoliberalism, the simultaneous inter- and intra-regional divide between those responsible for reproduction without adequate support, and the beneficiaries of that reproductivity. Sheila herself recognized her parent’s immigration from Ghana, then Italy, and then to the United States, as a movement from the place without resources and opportunities to the place with resources and opportunities. And she noted that even then, despite his movement to a place with resources and opportunities, it was difficult for her father to access those resources (by finding a job). In
the end, Sheila’s father was able to find work in the U.S., but it was not the kind of work that could allow him to send his daughter to college without her taking on immense personal debt. By casting her father as a person who had met expectations beyond the objective conditions he found himself in, and herself as someone who had not yet, she implied that his finding a job that allowed her such a comfort was beyond the expectations that should have been placed on her father. The credit for personal success started with her parents and ended when her failure to find a job after graduating from college began.

Sheila saw it as her responsibility to continue her family’s progression, to move them even further from a position of lack to a position of accumulation, in the global economy. Accordingly, her desire is not to simply replicate her father’s success by finding a job in the land of plenty, but to find a particular kind of job— one where she is not serving, but one where she is in power. Consider the particular recognition of this class divide in her life plan: Sheila did not want to be a nurse, a job that, while currently thought to be an industry of opportunity and growth, due in part to the rapidly aging population of the United States, exemplifies care labor and is very much situated in the reproductive sphere. It is also disproportionately made up of people of color and women in particular. For Laura (discussed at length in chapter three), a white woman with regular access to family wealth, this same occupation represented opportunity, and it seemed like a second chance at career stability and success. Sheila’s ambition was a different one: it’s not just that she wants to work in a different industry, fashion, rather than health, but she
wants a job of a different class character. An executive has power, decision-making, and access to capital and wealth.

However, the fact that Sheila held these ambitions not solely as a personal or individualized goal, but as a family goal, is critical to how she responded to her unemployment. Despite these clear and lofty ambitions, Sheila knew that the support she received from her family in the form of housing, food, and some minor financial assistance, to sustain her life day after day, were not to be taken lightly. Because of her student debt and lack of income, she owed them not only her best effort at upward mobility in the long term. In the short term, she owed them her labor. Sheila’s parents’ household was already being pushed to its limits, with another adult daughter and her two children currently under their roof. She, in turn, took on an immense responsibility to care for her family members, especially her nephew who lived under the same roof with her sister. Her unemployment was filled with labor. She described a typical day for herself:

Oh my God, a typical day: waking up, taking my nephew to the bus stop, come back home, searching for jobs, dropping off my mom at work, come back, apply for more jobs, take care of the house, clean the house, assist my sister (because I’ve been helping my older sister a lot because she’s a single mother, so I’ve been helping when it comes to her kids). Currently she has a newborn, which is 6 months, 7 months now. So for the moment, ‘til he grows up a little bit older, we’ve been helping with the oldest one. The oldest one just turned 4. So we’ve been helping her
with that. I feel like a lot of my time goes to, once again, taking care of my family, make sure they’re good, apply for jobs, taking care of my older nephew Sean.

Sheila’s return to her parents’ home had to be repaid, then, and since she was unable to pay money, she does so in an exchange of services. She would perform this unpaid reproductive labor, and her family would give her a place to live, and occasionally, when they could, help with her most pressing bills. The labor she was doing for her family was, ironically, much like the labor she was hoping to avoid in her future paid career, caring for others, rather than creating for others or managing others.

The careful illustration of a harried daily schedule on the part of the unemployed participant was not uncommon among participants in the study, but what is especially interesting here is Sheila’s insistence that she is doing this work in exchange for support from her family, and that her performing it is an unspoken trade between them. The refusal of her parents to ask her for rent is repaid by Sheila in the form of familial labor -- taking care of her nephew, driving her mother to work, cleaning the house-- which she performs without being asked. She knows, however, that this is real labor, and that it does, actually, inhibit her ability to search for a job full-time or pursue her ambitions:

And sometimes certain people that have talked to me feel like I’m putting my dreams away and just focusing on my family. Which I can understand that, some people may feel like I’m getting used and everything else like that but I feel like at the end of the day, [my parents] were there for me. They been there for me. I haven’t had bills to pay, I haven’t had rent to
pay. I haven’t had water bill or anything else like that. It’s not like they pass me, ‘Oh, you know, do you have your first rent?’ They haven’t asked me that. So, to me, it’s kinda like helping them. It’s like payback, because at the same time I can just sit home and just not do anything. I think it would be unfair.

The reciprocity Sheila sees as inherent to the exchange of help from her parents for help around the house and with their grandchildren is wrapped up in her ideas about what it means to be a child of immigrants, of parents who have worked incredibly hard and beaten the odds for her. That they haven’t asked her for rent (just yet) adds to her feelings of gratefulness to them, and then subsequently to the feeling of owing them something in return. The importance then of striking a balance between work at home and efforts toward future career success were not lost on Sheila, but she had decided for now that the work at home was a more important show of her commitment to them than was dedicating herself full-time to the job search:

So I’m trying to balance everything to still be able to find a job, being appreciative of what I have and same time, also help my family too because they been helping me, so why would I not help them? That’s very selfish. So, that’s what I’ve been doing. But sometime I just feel like I do a lot but I feel sometime it’s just not enough. I feel it’s just not productive enough even if I’m trying my best.

If productivity cannot be measured in terms of Sheila’s labor, her busy schedule, her efforts at home and still trying to find a job, then what does she mean here, when she
says she is not productive enough? Enough to repay her debt to her parents? Enough to catch up on her financial debts and move out? Or, enough to satisfy her sense that she has accomplished adequate upward mobility for the daughter of Ghanaian immigrants who have themselves achieved some stability, and even some generational advancement by having a college-graduate daughter? Sheila perceives her place in the global economy to be one where what she is doing is simultaneously the only economically feasible and just thing to do, but also where what she is doing falls short of meeting what should be expected of her, given her social and geographic location and her past accomplishments. Though unemployed, Sheila was busy full-time between her job search and her caregiving, and yet, she suggested this was still insufficient, still a hopefully temporary measure to be taken because of her lack of income and indebtedness. Sheila, like the participants in chapter four, knew that reproductive labor was valued less and perhaps of truly less value objectively speaking than the work she could do in the fashion industry. And yet, the combination of love and indebtedness she felt toward her family pulled her to that unpaid labor instead of into the fashion industry.

Sheila spoke of her Christian faith and church community as central to sustaining her through her difficulties, and helping her to maintain hope that finding the right job was possible, yet she admitted she was dishonest with them. The church community knew she had graduated college, and she never discussed her unemployment with them, so she was sure they assumed she was employed, and she hadn’t done anything to correct them. She felt shame, she said, and it affected her honesty, even with a community that was a major part of her life. For Sheila, there was a disconnect between what she and
those around her expected was the value of a college degree, and what, to that point, it had actually brought to her. She explained,

I’m trying not to act like this degree was for nothing, because I did it for my dad. I did it for my mom. It’s just hard sometimes to be positive about it and just be like, you know, this piece of paper that keeps me in debt for probably the rest of my life unless I find this executive job that I want, it’s not a waste. You know, I mean, it’s not a waste.

Sheila’s degree in business was not a waste for two reasons, first, because it was done for her parents, a sort of familial tribute for their hard work, and second, because she expected this would eventually translate into career satisfaction, financial success, and the erasure of her debts. But what if this cycle of familial and financial debts and struggles to repayment were exactly the thing holding Sheila back from breaking through to productivity that would be enough?

Sheila reassured herself: “It may be rough right now but it will pay later on. Sometimes you can appreciate a struggle to really appreciate a success. That’s what I keep on saying every day, you know?” Amidst this cycle of debts and repayments, Sheila’s consolation is futurity—imagining a future with a payoff for her and her parents’ labor. Her family’s American dream had been fulfilled through her parents, but it was her turn to put the dream on her shoulders. Fulfilling the dream in her generation required not just meeting similar goals (and in economic conditions that were objectively changed since her parents had first immigrated), but in exceeding those goals. Sheila’s hope was that the (possibly futile) efforts she made now to pay her debts to her family, even if they
exhausted her, distracted her, and made her feel inadequate, would transform these debts into pay-offs, in the future. Then, she hoped, maybe she would be able to say that these remittances had actually been investments all along. This futurity acted as an emotional buttress to her resilience and her ongoing labors. For Sheila, a future of depletion, failure, and permanent indebtedness was not an option worth speaking about, and surely not just because it would bring about hopelessness. For now, this kind of futurity was one Sheila could not afford to entertain.

Redemption through the family?
Sheila’s shame about her unemployment and her simultaneous belief that she should, and eventually would have the sort of financial stability and mobility she thought she could expect in the United States were similar to non-immigrant African Americans coping with serious debt and lack of access to personal or familial wealth. Not all of the participants in this position were as able or willing to insist on a brighter future. Some participants focused on the limits of their resiliency, or the limits of these familial strategies of survival. Here I consider two other participants who had followed very similar patterns to Sheila’s: personal debt, a return to the familial household, and then an even greater responsibility for unpaid reproductive labor as a result, a responsibility that potentially took opportunities in the market away even further. These participants demonstrate the easy movement between internalized guilt and frustration for what they see as their own failures and incisive disenchantment with markets, with states, and with families. The blame participants in this position of indebtedness feel, as well as their
constrained strategies for survival and repayment demonstrate the significance of the highly racialized phenomenon of debt, but also highlight the limits of the very futurity sustaining the labor of Sheila and so many others.

Ruth was a 57-year-old black woman who worked as a secretary in an attorney’s office for several years, until she was fired, after going to jail in 2009 for shoplifting. Her resultant felony conviction has been a huge barrier to employment, as it is for too many, especially black felons, in the U.S., despite the fact that Ohio law does not prohibit hiring felons. She had since worked one job at a factory that was open to hiring felons, but she was not hired on permanently, because she could not keep up with production during her trial period. It was heavy, physical work and her age and health made the labor difficult. The factory was a worker-run endeavor, where workers voted on one another to join the company long-term, but, Ruth complained, without the favor of a family member at the company, being voted in was difficult. Most of the workers were white men, with some young black men. Ruth hadn’t fit in and hadn’t been approved to stay on, which was a shame, because the job had seemed like a perfect solution to her economic woes: “[The] benefits are great. You get paid every week and the ones that are permanent workers, they get stock every month.” After Ruth failed to win over the support of fellow workers for a permanent slot, regular income, job stability, and the chance to accumulate wealth were lost opportunities.

When I met with her the first time she was taking part in a job-training program run by a private philanthropy that pays a small living stipend to its participants for six weeks, and she had moved in with her mother. Ruth spends most of her stipend on
clothes and gifts for her granddaughter and on bus fare, and uses her government-allotted food stamps to help support herself and her mother. The food stamps were one of the few material things she was able to contribute to the household’s well-being, but she was doing much more to support her mother as well. Her mother is in her late 70s and very ill with arthritis and a few other ailments. Ruth explained:

I’m more or less taking care of her now. That’s one reason I’m not too gung ho about finding a job right now, because she’s 77 right now and she has arthritis really bad in both knees so her muscles has deteriorated and she’s a big woman. Well big, considering 300 pounds and she can’t walk, so she has home health people come in and lift her up, hoist her. So you know, I’m there to cook, clean, [do] laundry, shopping. So I’m more concerned about her welfare than getting a job right now.

Not finding a job meant moving in with her mother, which meant caring for her mother and her mother’s household, but this, in turn, had come to mean more time spent without looking for a job.

Financial deficits and familial duties merged and even escalated one another, much the same as in Sheila’s situation. Though Ruth’s mother had occasional help from home-healthcare workers, while she was at her training classes, Ruth spent the rest of her day caring for her mother, bathing her, giving her medicines, cleaning their home, preparing food, and trying to keep her entertained and her spirits up, which she reported was one of her more difficult daily tasks. She said she even had to teach the paid workers
how to assist her mother properly, and this irritated her. “I would get mad, because it’s like this is not my job. I’m not getting paid for this.”

Ruth is a prime example of the multi-generationality and directionality of social reproduction in times of distress, as well as the flexibility of family members to play various roles as needed. In her story alone, we see parents caring for their children and children caring for their parents, non-parents caring for the children of their relatives, and a combination of financial and emotional resources being exchanged across a few different households. Ruth could not access the kinds of family-life-work narratives that participants in chapter two could, or the ones Sheila hoped would come to fruition if she merely bided her time and continued to give her parents what she felt she owed them. Unlike Brie, Ruth did not have a comfortable relationship with time. She could not say that she had spent her early parenting years accumulating and growing her wealth, buying a house, and creating roots for her daughter. The past haunted, rather than reassured Ruth. And it was not something she could just choose to reject, as women like Colleen did when they rejected being the “housemistress” or the “laundress” and returned to paid careers that recognized them as valuable in immediately material ways.

Ruth explained that she had a rough childhood. Her parents had eight children, and they were poor, but as she said, “growing up back then, we never thought we were poor.” She explained that her parents, despite their large family and financial problems, provided their kids with everything they wanted. Her dad had been an alcoholic and was frequently in and out of work until he died of cancer when she was still a child. Her mother had to go on welfare, and then, as she put it, “got a job, of all places, at the
welfare department.” The job and welfare had met her mother’s needs and helped her to raise her children into adulthood.

Ruth revealed more and more about how she had come to this precarious state after we had spoken for some time. Ruth explained that her shoplifting would never have happened if it hadn’t been for a separate source of shame in her life, a years’ long struggle with substance abuse and addiction. She revealed this to me after we had spoken extensively about her job and economic history, and about her history of stealing. It wasn’t just her felony that stopped her from getting employment, she hypothesized, but the particular charge of theft that sent her there--which she thought alarmed employers more than other offenses. She had a taste for nice things, and because of past credit card debt, she had no access to credit and had no way to pay for them. “I had credit cards. I used them. They came to the door, a guy from the bank came to the door and cut them up in front of me,” Ruth explained.

“And there’s just some things I’m not telling you, but I started doing heroin. And it’s been a long thirty years I’ve been fighting this disease,” she said, wanting to explain how the bad financial predicament had begun. She continued: “If I would have stayed on the track that I was supposed to, I would have been living in a 300 thousand dollar home. I’m on methadone now and that’s what’s helping me so...I didn’t tell you all of that but I just want you to know I’m not a lazy person or...” Ruth trailed off, in tears. I apologized for the difficulty of the interview, and thanked her for opening up the way she had. I reassured her that I had family members who were recovering addicts too, and that I certainly would never assume she was lazy. She went on to tell me about how her
addiction had begun, how it had ruined her relationship to her daughter’s father, and that it was something she would struggle with for the rest of her life and wish upon no one.

At no point had I pried into any of the sensitive topics she had alluded to after asking my basic questions about her difficulty finding work and her revelation that she had a felony conviction. I had not asked whether she was actually guilty of a crime, what crime she had committed, why she had done it, the nature of her addiction or the success of her recovery. So how had we gotten to the place we were in, a discussion of her addiction history and recovery? “I just want you to know I’m not a lazy person.” For Ruth, the shame of addiction she spoke of was trumped by the shame of me or perhaps others who would read the interview seeing her as unproductive, as lazy. Ruth was deeply protective of other parts of her story, too.

When she mentioned living with her mom, I asked whether her mother owned the home they lived in together. “Yes,” she said. I asked whether it was paid off or whether they still made payments. Here Ruth changed her story and admitted her mother lived in an assisted-living apartment, paid through her social security. Her mother did not own a home, and neither did she. She told me which suburb the apartment building was in. She repeated the name of the suburb twice and explained, “It’s ritzy ditzy, not the inner city.” She paused and explained her lie about owning a home: “You don’t have the stigma of ‘You’re a certain age, you should have a home.’” As a graduate student still in my 20s, I didn’t have this stigma, but she did.

Later, she returned to the issue of a home again. “The only way I can see getting a home is if I win the lottery. I’m not gonna get a credit card. I’m not gonna get anything
where it is dependent on my job, my credit score, or the way I took care of my past bills.”

Whereas Ruth saw her financial debts as unresolvable, she was hopeful she could repay what she owed her family members, and this did not just stop at what she owed her mother for her current housing, but extended through multiple generations Ruth feared she had failed to give what she owed.

Ruth had a granddaughter she doted on from a daughter with whom she had a rocky relationship. Because of her struggle with addiction, her daughter was raised, for the most part, by Ruth’s siblings and mother, with what Ruth reported was generous economic support from the daughter’s father, Ruth’s ex-boyfriend. Ruth was ashamed of her absence from her daughter’s life. I asked her what her daughter did for a living. Her daughter, 28, worked for a waste disposal company. It was an okay job, but Ruth wished she had been able to help her daughter achieve more than this. “I would have made sure she went to college. I have a niece that’s an RN. You know, I would have wanted a career for my daughter instead of a job. There’s lots of things that I wish I could take back in my life.”

For Ruth, nursing, and her niece’s position as a registered nurse, represented a clear sign of upward mobility, stability, and accomplishment. Like Sheila’s parents, Ruth saw nursing as both a practical and a respectable occupation for her daughter. But while Sheila hoped that through not taking this particular career path, she would make her parents much prouder and advance much farther than they had hoped, for Ruth, her daughter’s career path was a sign of her own failures as a mother.
Her daughter lived not in a ritzy ditzy neighborhood, but on the Westside, in a poor neighborhood called “the Hilltop.” The neighborhood was not just a sign that her daughter had failed to achieve the kind of financial success she had hoped she would, but was also a continued barrier to their relationship. For Ruth, getting to the Westside via a city bus was extremely inconvenient and took a couple hours to get there and back from the home she shared with her mom in a neighborhood in the Far Eastside of Columbus.

She said spoiling her granddaughter by buying her gifts with her weekly stipend from the job-training program was a way of making up for her past failings. We met in the early spring, and like all participants in our study, she received $30 to compensate her for her time spent sharing her story. She explained to me that just as she spent her weekly stipend from her training program on gifts for her granddaughter, she would use the interview compensation the same way, but for Ruth, this care for her granddaughter happened in the shadows of regret for the way she had cared for her daughter: “All the money I’m getting from you, that’s for Easter. [...] I mean I paid my last for my grandbaby. It’s like, wow. I wish I would have known when my daughter—what I was missing.”

Ruth is one of several children, but reported that her siblings were ungrateful to her mother, and unhelpful. She felt the burden of caring for her mother most acutely, because the others visited rarely and were unloving to their mother. One sister, who worked for a major bank, had power of attorney for her mother and managed her finances, but Ruth resented her sister for only being involved in this material way: These siblings offered little care, time, or money to her and to her mother, and she felt they
judged her for her past of addiction and legal trouble. At that time, the job training program and taking care of her mother were all she could handle each day, and she’d given up looking for a job for the time being. Taking care of her mom was job enough, and plus, for now, the role was meeting her basic needs. But she told me she worried too, because she knew that when her mother died, not only would she lose her companion, but also her access to housing and to her mother’s social security, which they both relied on.

As a result of her long-term unemployment, Ruth shifted earning an income and even trying find a new way to do so, to providing reproductive labor by caring for her mother, and thus making up for the inability of the state to provide home health services beyond a few hours a day for her. Ruth’s unpaid reproductive labor was the only way she had access to housing and a livable income. On the one hand, she did everything in her power to care for her mother and to make her life longer and more pleasant; on the other, her mother was the only source of stability she had, both in her familial relationships and her financial well-being. Her mother’s survival was the only hope she had of having a place both to live in and to consider a home. In part, however, it was the burden of this labor of caregiving that prevented her from seeking employment. Whether this symbiosis could be sustained beyond the next month, or the next year, was a source of major anxiety in Ruth’s life. The training program she was involved in was nice for the time being, but she didn’t seem hopeful about her prospects of finding a job when it ended.

I asked, aside from the $100 a week she was getting through her training program, and her food stamps, how she was getting by:
My mother, my mother. And I look at reality. Reality of it is I need a job, ‘cause my mother’s not gonna be here long and then what am I gonna do? What am I really gonna do? Yeah, I can go stay with my daughter, but I don’t want that. I’m a grown woman. And I get in a mood where it’s more like self-pity, like my God, I was supposed to be something. A person my age is supposed to be living in a $300,000 home or something with money in the bank to go on vacation, with a car or two parked in the garage, not walking to the bus stop.

While staying with her mother was unavoidable, but tolerable reality, so long as Ruth is able to contribute in care, cooking and cleaning, staying with her daughter would be a different kind of failure altogether—not just a sign of her financial inadequacy, but also her familial inadequacy. So much of this sense of failure and anger became tied to Ruth’s location—not just the neighborhood she lived in and whether it was a ritzy one or a poor one, and not just the home—but was it a rental, did she own it, or was it her daughter’s rental? Location became significant to the experience of unpaid labor during unemployment and its meaning, not just on the level of town or neighborhood, but at the level of the deed to a particular property and whose name was on it.

If Ruth’s failures are simultaneously familial and financial—a failure to mother appropriately, and a failure to reach her earning and saving potential as an individual—and the solutions are likewise interlinked—to compensate for mothering failures through spending on a granddaughter, to compensate for financial failures through caring for her mother--what future does this leave her? Ruth recognizes that in this cycle of competing
deficits, redemption is necessarily impossible, in any way but through the divine. She explained that because of this, she tried not to worry about debt much, even as she had to avoid calls from collections agencies regularly, because, in the end, this was something she would die with: “You’re gonna go to your grave owing someone, unless you’re in Hollywood or was born into money or something, or if you get a good job.”

Futurity, history, and the dream of mobility through reproduction

Donald was 22 years old, a young black man from a suburb on the eastern edge of Columbus, surrounded on its west side by one of the highest concentrations of poverty in the city, and on its east by wealthy, mostly white suburbs. He was brimming with confidence and optimism when we met, despite his difficult circumstances. He worked for a cousin’s restaurant on the east side of the city to support himself and to help his mother with bills from junior high through a couple years after dropping out of high school. The restaurant went out of business during the worst of the financial crisis in 2009, and he moved a hundred miles north to Canton with his grandmother and uncles. He had also been fighting with his mom’s new boyfriend who had moved in with them, and he wanted to get away from their household. Employment was equally difficult to find in Canton. Then, his grandmother, whom he had stayed with, died. He had a four-year-old daughter from a relationship in high school. He and his daughter’s mother had long fought over whether he could visit her in Columbus, and he knew he would have a much easier time visiting her if he lived in the same city.
He moved back to Columbus to live with his mother again and to find work. His mother, who raised him as a single parent while going to college and working full-time throughout his childhood, was ill with chronic kidney disease, and required frequent care for her dialysis. Her boyfriend had since moved out, making his decision to return to his mother’s home even easier. He told me he spent most of his time at home taking care of her, and spent weekends with his daughter. When we first met, he was attending a class to get a GED, and worked construction as part of a job-training program financed by the county, which paid him $300 every two weeks for his participation. He also qualified for $200 of food assistance every month and gave half to his mother and half to his daughter’s mother. Before Donald moved back from Akron, his younger sister, a 19 year old, had been his mother’s primary caretaker. She had since started taking college classes in addition to having a part-time job.

Donald said that he hoped to become a truck driver when he completed the GED, and was excited at the prospect of being able to see the country. “What about your mom?” I’d asked. Who would take care of her with him on the road? His younger sister could handle that, just like she had before, he’d said. While he seemed very comfortable with and even proud of his caretaker status, it was clear that he saw this as a temporary state, a condition of his economic dependence. “What else would you rather be doing than making money?” He asked me.

His aunt, whose restaurant had gone under, continued to provide help to them, as well as some friends and other close family, and he was confident there would be enough help when he became a truck driver. Donald added, “But you know how that be
sometimes. People grow distance, things switch up...” Note the shifting relationships that Donald both contributes reproductive labor to and which he relies on for his own and his daughter’s subsistence. He is, on the one hand, confident these relationships, no matter their ultimate configuration, will come through for his mom and himself, and yet, he notes the precarity of them as well. Things switch up, as he says. His jobs, up until now, have come through family connections, and he has had to rely on multiple family members in multiple households, not just his mother, for housing and meeting his basic needs when his income has been low or non-existent. The members of a family engage in meeting particular reproductive goals for each other change, based in part on the particular reproductive needs and capabilities they have.

Donald was especially focused on using his capabilities to support his mother, and to provide for his daughter. He spent as much as he could earn on her, he said. I asked if there was anything about his parenting he’d like to change, and whether he thought his joblessness affected the kind of dad he could be:

Oh, there’s always room for improvement, and of course, it’s stuff that I wanna change, but yeah, so far--like, because she just turned four, her birthday was in Chuck E. Cheese and I just took her to Chuck E. Cheese and let her really just go crazy on all the toys. [...] And then like Christmas, she had so much stuff for Christmas and I got stuff for her at the house she hasn’t opened, but I just feel like if I was more stable, I could have her more, we can do more things, ‘cause I want my daughter to
grow up knowing different things and different people and different nationalities. ‘Cause I don’t want her to just be in a bubble of Columbus.

Donald’s assessment of his ability to parent, despite his financial instability, included more than his ability to provide for her financially, but his ability to spend time with her, and his ability to shape her into the kind of person he wanted her to be. He had found a way to continue providing for her financially, at least in ways she would notice—like he did at Christmas, by patching together his food stamps, his job program, and his mother’s help. What he wanted more of was time—time and the ability to show and teach her more with that time. He was performing unpaid reproductive labor as a result of his unemployment, but it was not necessarily the kind of reproductive labor he had wanted to do. “That’s why I was going on the job hunt,” he explained later:

So I can get a car, be able to pick my daughter up, take her back and forth to school, because she’s not in school or daycare and I feel like she needs to venture out and start being around other little kids, and don’t just see a different setting than the home setting.

He hoped that someday he and his current girlfriend would get a place together, somewhere with a bedroom for his daughter when she comes to stay. At the time, she had no bedroom when she was with her mother, who lived with her parents too, or at his mom’s house, and this bothered him a lot. I asked if it bothered him because he felt she was in environments that were too crowded.

No, no matter if it wasn’t even crowded. It’s just like, “You’re staying at your grandma’s house and you got two parents, adults. I’m twenty-two and
[your mother’s] twenty, so, there’s no reason for you to be staying at your grandma’s house or at my mom’s house. You should have your own house.”

Even though he had spent nearly an hour explaining to me why he had such a difficult time accumulating wealth and finding financial stability, he felt these were inadequate excuses for not providing what he felt he owed his daughter. On the one hand, Donald’s story shows the extent to which the dominant gendered family order where women are especially responsible for reproductive labor remains in place through his family’s difficult circumstances, as we see through the roles his mother, child’s mother, and sister play. His life is very much about single mothers and their persistence, and he said as much. But it is also undeniable that now Donald’s unpaid labor is helping his family to cope with his mother’s illness, and that it is partially the crisis that has put him in the position to take on some of this labor and to free up his sister and, on weekends, his daughter’s mother, to take part in other activities (she is attending college and working).

The gendered order of social reproduction was flexible and negotiable, especially during the crisis, and Donald’s identity as a loyal and indebted son, to a tireless, black single mother, made him comfortable with the role of caretaker, at least temporarily. His mother and daughter were not the only ones to benefit from his labor. This labor gave him some small form of social capital, in a world where, as an unemployed, young black man and father, this capital was scarce. He took pride in his mother’s strength, and in his loyalty to her. “She’s a trooper, and we be troopin’ with her,” he said.
Still, this was not sufficient for him. Donald had met a colleague of mine from the research project at a job fair in the city. Donald was at the job fair looking for a second job while he is in the GED and job training programs, but because he doesn’t have a car, and has to rely on friends and family for transportation, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to find one that could fit his limited resources. His need to leave the site of the household for productive labor was hampered by this reliance on others for transportation to most jobs. He told me he would happily take on another job, possibly even two others. He had a conversation with recruiters from UPS at the job fair, and was interested in working there part time, but was not sure how he would get there. He was concerned about being too bound to home for his daughter’s well-being as well. His return to the domestic sphere simultaneously gave him a space to care for her, and made it difficult for him to do more for his daughter and for himself.

The location of his mother’s household takes on multiple meanings here. On the one hand, it’s a place Donald temporarily had to leave, because of the people present there, and on the other, it was a refuge he could return to, without a job, to be closer to his daughter, when he felt it was necessary to his relationships and economic situation. But this was not an ideal or long-term solution. He wanted to be working, for pay, to have his own space, to be a dad who could provide much more, and a son who did not need his mother’s house. He was happy to give care, but wanted to be able to give care in the form of money, not in the same form he had been giving it to that point. He wanted to protect the women in his life, and to do so by being a provider, “to be able to take care of something. If my sister needed some money or my mom, my girlfriend; just to be able to
help everybody and be like that strong support team for--’cause I’m really the only male figure in my household.” Donald’s ultimate desire to be making money and to make that his main form of care-contribution to the household were certainly influenced by his sense of manhood and masculinity, but they were also not entirely incompatible with medical care, with parenting, with quality time and helping out however a person needed. His masculinity was not threatened by that role, as Daniel’s had been, the unemployed electric company dispatcher from chapter three, whose girlfriend had been forced to earn money, while he had to help out more at home, thus changing what he felt was their desired “arrangement.” But he also knew what kinds of labor were most valued by society, and especially when there was only one man in the house and several dependents looking for more financial support. It was in that context of scarcity that the care he was giving was insufficient.

His presence in the home not only provided him some stability and the chance to support his daughter, but also required of him contributions to his family, through taking care of his mother, and made what he wasn’t giving them all the more apparent and immediate. Familial decision-making is impossible to tease out into more distinctive thoughts. For Donald, the consequences of this familial strategy were most noticeable in its effects on his sense of sociality and his daughter’s. Once returned to his mother’s home, the inability to leave home at will was a concern, a further effect of his financial insecurity. It was certainly affecting his ability to become economically independent of his mother and of the county (and state), and he worries similarly about what effects this isolation in the home will have on his daughter and her development. He told me
repeatedly how important it was to him that she be able to see places and meet different people as he wanted for himself. For Donald, this was an indicator of the difference between desperation and resilience. Could he merely provide her shelter? Somewhere to stay? Or could he give her the ability to leave and enter that shelter as she wished, to have a household but not be bound to it, and to see the world beyond the narrow confines of one city, as he hoped he would achieve for himself as well?

Whatever happened, Donald wanted to play a bigger role in that future than he had been able to do so far. Donald recognized that for his daughter, several different figures’ success, or their ability make their current strategies more than mere desperation, and not just his own reproductive labor, would have an immense effect on whether opportunities would manifest in her life. What would her mother do for her? What opportunities would his girlfriend help him create? Would his extended family continue to be there for them or would things “switch up”? For now, they were all getting by, but what he wanted was more than getting by. To this point, he hadn’t fulfilled what he owed, not just as a child of someone who had worked hard to take care of him, but specifically as a son, a man, and a father. “I just feel like as you get older, things progress; you need more, you gotta take care more.”

Donald, like Brie, the mother from chapter three who had used her unemployment as an opportunity to invest in her daughter’s career readiness, saw aging as a process with two interconnected, normative processes, that of his familial growth and his financial growth. Brie felt she had aged beyond the years where her financial growth and new investments, and her creation of a family, were her age-appropriate goals. She was ready
to “maintain,” as she put it, and to focus on creating the stability and making the investments of her time that would give her daughter the opportunity to build her own life and progress on her own age-appropriate journey. Donald saw himself at that earlier juncture, when he was supposed to be building up and expanding, not only acquiring and expanding wealth, but also expanding the care he took. He was twenty-two, as he said. But Donald was trying to make that life-transition without a college degree, with a mother who had health problems and to whom he owed his time and care, and with a daughter who depended on him before even he was able to depend on himself. He was without a partner with a good job and the prospects of home ownership were far off. And in an economic landscape that had transformed in critical ways since Brie had been in her twenties or since his mother had raised him as a single mother, Donald’s own desires, efforts, and decisions were not the only factors in whether he would be able to make of his early twenties what he thought he should.

Likewise, Sheila did not recognize the changes that the economic landscape had undergone since her father and mother had immigrated and found jobs, or the difficulty she faced in trying to enter an industry that was very different from the ones they were able to find jobs in upon their arrival. Ruth knew things had changed since she was a child and since her parents were working. But she was mostly prepared to speak of change for the better. The neoliberal narratives she had at hand or at least which she felt comfortable invoking in that interview setting included one of post-racism, and so she mostly recognized historical change for the better—that she had opportunities to go to parts of the city and find jobs her mother would not have been allowed. But what about
those other changes? For instance, that her mother had once worked at the welfare office, and now there was scarcely a welfare office to turn to, let alone one she could work for.

Participants across the spectrum of intersecting inequalities that make up this sample all spoke of the future in order to make sense of and cope with their present. But for these three participants, the past, even history from before they were born, was perhaps more salient and yet still ultimately obfuscated by the discourses of self-efficacy and of expectations on them that they called on to discuss their prospects. These participants differed in their ability to use unemployment and the unpaid labor it brings as an investment in themselves and others, rather than as repayment for debts that in turn created more debts and more precarity. But the emotional costs of their misrecognition or lack of recognition of historical change were also more exaggerated for these subjects than for Brie and others. Brie had the benefit of viewing the “big and scary” as an unknown that she feared she might have to face in the future. Until then, her neoliberal narratives were a comfort, rather than a burden: They could account for her successes in the past, help her to feel good about the unpaid work she was doing at home, explain away her unemployment and the injustice of it as temporary, and as opportunities to be exploited by her. Her ability to focus on the future, and to frame her present through it, did not shield her from the possibility that there were worse times ahead. But as long as Brie could keep on as she and her husband and daughter were doing at the time, she could feel she had done what a successful person was supposed to have done. Any bad that befell her beyond that was a part of the “big and scary” unknown she had spoken about. For Sheila, Donald, and Ruth, the neoliberal narratives also sustained them emotionally,
and likewise, their looking to the future gave them hope. But their not contending with the injustices of the past nor those of the present, nor grasping the significance or precise directionality of historical change, bred more self-doubt and self-blame, more insistence that they should be doing better, rather than critiquing the circumstances in which they found themselves. Instead of leading them to critiquing the society that insisted on the efficacy of individuals while so unequally providing opportunity, these narratives functioned as a list of possible personal faults they might turn to if the worst still lay ahead.

Austerity and the social reproduction of debts

These stories, as others that take individuals who are part of familial networks as their basis, present an opening for considering the complex network of relations and resources that make possible the persistence of social reproduction in times of crisis, and they point us toward not only some of the factors that could create limits on social reproduction, but to the effects that can come from performing day-to-day social reproduction in what others might consider to be resilient ways. That these stories of resilience are very much about families, both what they provide and what they demand, is no coincidence in the era of austerity and market crisis.

These stories also show the relationship between individuals, families, and the state in this context. The state, by continuing to provide some, but rather minimal welfare support for social reproduction (food stamps, disability income, medicare), shapes whether or not a family, even a family with relative material security, can or cannot be
helpful to these individuals and their dilemmas. There is no question that the ever-weakening welfare state in the United States continues to provide key staples necessary to social reproduction for at least some of these families. Ruth and Donald in particular were able to make this familial strategy work, in part, because of that state support—between Ruth’s mother’s social security benefits, Donald’s GED program run by the county, and both Donald’s and Ruth’s access to food stamps, which they used as payment to their parents for services rendered. Even in Sheila’s case, whose family was not evidently receiving direct welfare assistance from the state, how might her student debt have grown, were it not for federally subsidized loans?

Yet, the very limited nature of this assistance had also put them in positions of both continued reliance on the state welfare, and thus, vulnerable to its withering, and in fact constrained their ability to participate in the market. Ruth’s mother’s assisted living facility was not enough to provide her adequate care, and so Ruth had to redirect her focus from the job market to her mother’s well-being. This points us to a clear limitation to these social reproductive orders, where state welfare systems are in fact encouraging greater participation in unpaid reproductive labor, rather than in the paid economy, even while the touting of job creation is one of the most important measures of whether or not a given locale is working.

In both Ruth’s and Donald’s cases, the question of what they would do or would have done in their situations if they did not have a parent to care for loomed over our conversations. Was the existence of such a parent-in-need crucial to their ability to access this housing in their own financial turmoil? If there were no job to be done upon moving
in, would these parents have permitted the return of their adult children? Was their care work really as crucial as they said it was to each parent’s well-being, and to their own security while they were unemployed? Of course, these are unanswerable questions, even for Ruth and Donald. In practice, they do not have the luxury of teasing out financial questions from familial ones or considering the hypotheticals of change on one of these fronts of the other. These questions occur all at once, feeding and complicating each other in turn--the closing of an aunt’s restaurant, the fights with the mother’s boyfriend, the inability to finish high school, the grandmother’s death, the daughter’s immediate needs.

The benefit of the social reproduction framework is that it does not require an analysis with a linear story about how economic problems become family ones—or the other way around. One could not possibly speak of the actually existing economy without also accounting for the role of families and their key involvement in production and reproduction, or of families without considering the material relationships between the parties that constitute them. Beyond this, the study of the unpaid labor and the reproduction of these unemployed individuals from marginalized and struggling families helps to illustrate why it is that experiences of, and even the occasional recognition of how unfair the system is, still fail to inspire something that would amount to politicization and political resistance. Consider Ruth’s feelings that she had failed as an individual, as a mother, as a worker. Her own recognition of her shortcomings remains completely separate from her sense that the world she has navigated has been an unfair one, one in which a miracle from God, winning the lottery, and finding a good job are all commensurate possibilities.
The stories academics tell about neoliberalism and precarity must take into account histories of racial inequality and the ways in which stories of self-efficacy, familial need, and generational improvement are constructed differently for black and white families, as are precarity and experiences of neoliberalism themselves. Ultimately, in addition to neglecting the realities of systematic racism, efforts to redress racial inequalities through reforms of the family fail to recognize that labor and debt are always-already familial as well as financial affairs. Since the 1960s, the idea that families could, through their own sheer will and their sense of responsibility and virtue, create economic opportunities where there were none, and produce wealth out of debt, has become an increasingly common-sense logic of policy-making. Ironically, this very belief, which has buttressed and championed welfare retrenchment for decades, from Reagan’s restructuring of the tax code, to welfare reform under Clinton, has made the compounding effects of financial and familial debts even more intense.

As the state has receded from the business of social reproduction, as well as from the business of regulating and rescuing markets, it is no surprise that families that started with little wealth would produce children who have, in many cases, even less wealth and more debt, while those that started with some wealth could invest that in their families and into markets to produce more. Just as the black power and civil rights movements created the space for the state and market to recognize black Americans as citizens, as economic actors, and their families as welfare-state beneficiaries, the political economic terrain shifted beneath their feet; of course, this was no coincidence. The cleaving of two general and
polarized types of experiences of unpaid labor among working people in the aftermath of the economic crisis is not just one happening between rich and poor, or between those who have the security of family with access to wealth and those who do not. Given the historical realities of racial inequalities and all the other social stratification this dissertation has detailed, the polarization of unpaid labor will increase these divides, across the working class. Most perniciously, as Ruth, Daniel, and Sheila’s stories have shown, unpaid labor polarization reproduces inequality while obfuscating its own force in shaping individuals’ lives.
“If I’d known it was going to be like this,” 49-year-old Emily said, “I would’ve just stayed married.” Over the course of an afternoon, she’d told me about her life since she had decided to leave her husband of twenty-five years, with whom she had been living for almost all that time in his home country of Ireland. She moved into her mother’s house in Central Ohio, about an hour away from Columbus, with her two teenaged daughters under the auspices of a vacation and a six-month sabbatical from her full-time work in student affairs at an Irish university. She waited a few weeks before telling her mother the trip would be much longer, and that she had no intention of returning to her husband in Ireland, a man who was a good father, but who was bad with money, bad at taking care of his own mental and physical health, and someone she realized she now had little in common with.

Her devoutly Catholic mother did not take the news well. Before long, the living situation there became untenable, as her mother constantly raised the subject of the end of Emily’s marriage, and became increasingly strict about the cleaning and cooking behaviors of Emily and her daughters who were staying there. The tensions over how Emily lived within her mom’s house and why she was living there at all became too much for their relationship, even though Emily desperately needed the housing and support. Emily used a credit card and borrowed some money from her brother to move...
her daughters into a two-bedroom apartment, where they could be themselves, but where the bills were mounting and space was limited.

She had worked half a dozen odd jobs in the past year since she’d made the big move, her most recent as a part-time landscaper for a public garden. Her credit cards were maxed out, and she was receiving calls from collectors all the time. In addition to working-hours that were constantly changing as she moved from job to job, sometimes keeping more than one at a time, she picked up her nieces from school regularly, and cared for them while her brother and sister-in-law were at work when needed, in exchange for sporadic financial support from them. Though she was grateful for their financial support and understood why she was expected to reciprocate, she resented the implication of her inferiority and subservience to her brother this situation created.

To make matters even more painful, her 16-year-old daughter decided that life with her newly single mother was lonely, especially because it had taken her across the world, disrupting her schooling and the comforts of a culture she had grown up in from a young age. She also missed her father, and felt bad that he had been left behind. She decided to return to Ireland when the next school year began, rather than to begin at a U.S. high school as her mother had hoped she would. The departure of her daughter was devastating to Emily, and her discussion of it was the only moment in our conversation that brought her to tears. “Sometimes I feel I’m failing as a parent,” she told me.

In this tumult, Emily’s social and professional networks in Ohio were rapidly expanding even as the old networks were strained and sometimes broken. There were new groups she depended on and those who now depended on her: In addition to a new
boyfriend and revived relationship with her older brother (the same one who lent her
money in exchange for her taking care of his young children), there were the résumé
consultants, job fair contacts, a host of revolving bosses, sympathetic and otherwise, and
temp agencies. There were receptionists at the doctor’s office that she was sure judged
her for her lack of health insurance. There was the daughter of her boss at the dress shop,
who was worried Emily would become the new favorite at work, and thus, Emily was
sure, had gotten her fired.

A white, married woman with a college degree, a completed-thesis away from a
Master’s degree, a middle-class job in Ireland, as well as a homeowner, she (relative to
other job seekers at the time) voluntarily entered the stream of unemployed professionals
searching for jobs in Ohio in 2010 in the midst of a massive unemployment crisis. She
found herself navigating a global economy in crisis and trying to derive from it both a
sense of emotional and familial contentment and a salary she and her children could live
on comfortably. Her regret about her decision at the time we spoke, her sense that if she
could do it again she would have stayed married longer, may not have lasted forever.
Perhaps in a year she would tell a very different story: how she’d sacrificed money,
 stability, and familial relationships at a time of great economic difficulty for a taste of
personal fulfillment, and she’d come out on the other side more content, financially self-
sufficient, and with a new kind of happy, though less traditional, family. Or perhaps she
would tell an even darker and more desperate story: that a search for greater personal
fulfillment had been a disastrous gamble, that it had thrust her from the middle class into
poverty and had simultaneously strained and then broken all semblance of a happy family life she had known before.

Potentially, even if she were able to find a decent job and earn enough to support herself and her kids, the decision would permanently increase the amount of work she had to do to maintain close relationships with family--not only with her daughters and her mother, but other kin as well, like a brother to whom she was now indebted. What’s more, perhaps her decision had permanently damaged her daughters’ view of her, her own confidence in her decision-making abilities, and her belief that her personal happiness was worth the trouble of drastic changes.

Emily’s story is one that the more sensationalist public discourse on the effects of the recession might ordinarily overlook, because rather than falling victim to a layoff or a closing business, Emily voluntarily left a relatively comfortable job and living situation, and it was this decision that caused her initial economic distress. Additionally, since most public discussions of the Great Recession have been more concerned with employment than with the more intimate effects of economic crisis on individuals’ lives, Emily’s family pain may also be overlooked. But of course, though Emily actively chose to leave her comfortable job more than someone who was fired or laid off during the crisis, the effects of the recession impacted what might ordinarily have been a much smoother transition accompanying the dissolution of a marriage and a move and job hunt overseas.

Ironically, Emily’s identity positions her for sympathy, the overall discourse of economic crisis, even while her voluntary unemployment, does not. Dara Strolovitch has shown that the very construction of the crisis is built on a new recognition of the living
conditions that more marginalized people experienced prior to that time, but which were overlooked as “normal,” so long as they were limited to the very poor and particularly to people of color, rather than touching largely white, college-educated, middle-class (2013). Perhaps it was the recognition of all she had going for her prior to her decision to leave her husband that contributed to Emily’s own lack of sympathy for her situation, and her conviction that she had made the wrong decision in leaving her husband at the time she did.

For Emily, the experience of moving to the U.S. with her family and without a job is quite different from the case of those who immigrate from the Global South to contribute care and service work to the U.S. economy, often leaving behind their children and families out of economic need. Surely, both migrations have potentially devastating consequences and trade-offs for the subjects, but citizenship, education, and family relations change the nature of that experience and the kind of labor it draws out of the subjects upon their arrival. Emily performs some social reproductive labor for her family in exchange for what she hopes is temporary financial support. Though having to leave a part-time job to do so is difficult for Emily, it takes place as a kind of investment in a more financially and emotionally secured future. If she can trade childcare for financial support from her brother for now, she hopes, she can manage to stay in the country long enough (while keeping her debts low) to find a full-time job that will not only make ends meet, but allow her personal happiness and freedom from a bad marriage she could not have had while she was in Ireland.
For Emily, participation in paid social reproductive labor, working fast food or as a substitute teacher, was also likely temporary, or at least she was able to comfort herself with a likely scenario in which this was the case. This is far different from participating in paid social reproductive labor in order to justify one’s very presence in the U.S., without familial support or promise of an exit from reproductive labor to more selective employment and upward class mobility in the future. But what else does an analysis of racial and national difference get us, besides recognition of the different opportunities any two subjects may have in their social reproductive lives? What does this difference amount to, not just in shaping distinct individual biographies, but in the overall story of the global economy?

Such feelings of regret about her decisions were likely a response to the actual hardship Emily had endured, but also reflect the economism of our age, or “the economization of life,” as Michelle Murphy terms it (2011)—where in all walks of life, from policy to individual experience, decisions must be made for how they will affect an abstract notion of the economy or of economic health, and this trumps all other factors. Even some of my colleagues agreed with Emily that she’d made a terrible decision by choosing to end her marriage during an economic crisis, instead of waiting until the economy had recovered somewhat. “She should’ve just waited [the recession] out,” one, woman colleague remarked to me as we were discussing Emily’s case. The idea that one must account for the financial impact of beginning or ending a marriage, even in an age where the hegemonic ideal of marriage is built first and foremost on love and companionship, remains prevalent. The durability of the importance of finances to
marital decision-making was reinforced by how seemingly common-sense it seemed to my colleagues, and to Emily in retrospect, to stay in a bad marriage until a financially stable option for leaving presented itself.

The language of bucking up, tightening one’s belt, and living with less--less money, less leisure time, less stability, and less personal and familial fulfillment--has been endemic to the public discourse surrounding financial crisis since the housing bubble burst in 2007 and in financial crises before that (Zaretsky 2007). From the pressure to stay with houses whose values were plummeting and mortgages that were draining families of every penny, to the pressure on tax payers to foot the bill to save the banks in 2008, this notion of collective sacrifice for the greater good and for a better future has been ongoing. But what are the effects of this sentiment on those who have both done as they were told and bucked up, and those, like Emily, who decide they simply cannot bide their time and sacrifice their own happiness or comfort any longer for the good of their pocketbooks?

The unpaid reproductive labor of the unemployed takes many forms, from cooking at home a few additional meals a week to taking over the major responsibilities of care for a sick relative. What this labor means to the individuals who perform it also varies, sometimes even changing over the course of a few months for one individual. Participants’ discussions of this labor, what it means, and how it fits with their larger experience of joblessness are shaped by their relationships to the time and place in which they are living and looking for work. They invoke the discourses available to them in that time and place in order to make sense of their situations and even to comfort them at a
time of difficulty, but they are also often limited in their abilities to see their relationship to larger forces by the same discourses. None of the working people in this dissertation have earned such privilege or comfort through their unpaid labor or any other means to relieve themselves of the ultimate stress of joblessness in a time and place that privileges the job. Yet, this does not mean their experiences have an equivalent impact on their own fate, on their families’ futures, or on the discourses they will shape as they circulate in the world with the lessons they have learned from their period of unemployment.

Emily’s dependence on her family of origin after leaving her husband brought her to a mid-sized town an hour from Columbus, rather than a major American city. She knew this was hurting her job prospects, and yet her affective ties to her family were, for now, shaping her economic decision-making, rather than being dictated by it (just as the rupture in those affective ties had influenced her when she decided leaving her husband was more important than keeping her job). Her job background in university administration and her new life in a town with no university and not many nearby made a change of careers a near-necessity. Her only other hope was finding a university job in Columbus that paid enough that she and her daughter could relocate there permanently. But this would require immense luck on the job market in Columbus. Furthermore, as I show in chapter two, local economic policies base job development on an unending competition for employers, sometimes courting them from one or two towns over. What they then deem to be the success of winning one new employer to the town elides the fact that most job seekers are searching for jobs within a radius that extends far beyond one town or one immediate metropolitan area, as Emily was.
Emily was simultaneously dependent on the small town her mother lived in for her immediate reproduction at the time, contributing to that town as a worker at a variety of service-oriented jobs and as she cared for her niece and other family, and was limited in her own ability to provide for herself by the local economy her family relations attached her to. These analyses of the meaning of place and labor in each of the interviews in this dissertation highlight the ways in which the unemployed, through their own reproductive labor, help to constitute the overall landscape of inequality in their locations. How Emily navigated the difficult choices between family and jobs, between feeling tied emotionally to her place and the people she was surrounded by and feeling free to pursue all the best economic opportunities she might have, were actually influencing the social reproduction not only of Emily and her daughters, but others in and around her in her small town and small social network in Ohio.

Why Unpaid Labor Polarization Matters

In traditional Marxist theory, one’s relation to the means of production through either employment or ownership is the most profound and immutable producer of unequal experiences of the social totality. But as previous chapters have shown, not all forms of unemployment, of not relating to the means of production, are created equal. Examining the polarized experiences of the unemployed with unpaid reproductive labor reveals one way in which workers’ unequal positions in the global economy reproduce inequality further, even among workers who are all jobless. Rather than provoking greater class-consciousness or awareness of the exploitation of the unemployed workers’ unpaid labor,
increasingly common periods of joblessness serve to reproduce inequalities between the working class, much like the stratified productive sphere does. This period of joblessness and individual workers’ ability to sustain themselves until they either find paid work again or permanently leave the workforce (due to qualifying for disability insurance or social security upon reaching retirement age) are crucial to the continuation of neoliberal capitalism.

As Elson (2012) and Rai (2012) point out, there are surely limits to how long and among which groups of unemployed workers this mode of social reproduction can be maintained. Individuals’ willingness and ability to reproduce themselves and their families absent state infrastructure or employment are one of the subjective features in determining the limits of resilience under these conditions. In other words, what people are willing to put up with, what they are willing to contribute when they are not being supported back, and how they are rewarded or punished for these behaviors are central to the future objective conditions of political economic relations, of the success or failure, continuity or rupture, of social reproduction.

As I have shown in previous chapters, for some workers, the sustainability of this model of social reproduction depends on their physical and mental health, whether they maintain sobriety while undergoing significant financial and emotional stress, whether their family members live long enough to provide them with a residence and a reason to wake up each day. For others, the sustainability of this model is much less concrete. It is dependent not on the immediacy of physical health outcomes and access to basic resources of human survival, but on the economy, their economic fates, and what the
things so many recognized as beyond their control end up teaching them about the
questions their long-term unemployment may have raised for the first time about the
payoff and rewards of work.

My intention in drawing out the polarization of these experiences is not to suggest
that there are immediate and clear divisions along any particular combination of race,
gender, and class identities in the current context. As I have shown, though particular
analysis of individuals and their relationships to historical forces of inequality lays bare
the importance of these identities to their experience, there is enormous contingency and
a plurality of outcomes and experiences across individuals from similar race, gender, and
class backgrounds. And as Emily’s case highlights, no fate is entirely predictable, even
among the most privileged and most precarious subjects. Unpredictability, that is, an
inescapable precarity of outcomes, is one of the few conditions we can call truly
universal across this sample.

Rather, the purpose of identifying this general trend in which already-displaced
workers are on diverging paths toward bad experiences and good experiences and effects
of unpaid labor, at a time of such difficulty, is that it shows how difficult it is under the
current political paradigms of personal blame, the-family-as-savior, and an over-inflated
sense of what opportunities await willing workers in cities like Columbus, to identify the
problems and inequalities of the system. That some subjects are receiving or perceive
themselves to be receiving pleasure, personal and familial benefits, and even future
economic opportunities from the performance of this work under such circumstances
makes that political work even more difficult. This polarization is a social and political
problem for anyone invested in creating an economy that can sustain and contribute to greater individual and familial stability where it is wanted, rather than less of it.

Solving the problem of polarization

There are a number of policies that could almost instantly level the playing field between unemployed workers and reduce the burden for unpaid labor many of them experience. These policies could either allow these workers to perform less of it altogether, or to find themselves in a position in which they can use it to invest in themselves and their loved one’s futures, rather than as a means of survival that has further negative consequences. These policies include: subsidized, high-quality daycare for low-income people who are employed and unemployed. Caretaking for one’s own children or the children of relatives who are helping to support the unemployed person take a significant amount of time. Minimum unemployment insurance for all workers, regardless of whether they worked part-time or full-time prior to being jobless, and regardless of the cause of their termination, would relieve a great amount of the immediate financial stresses some workers face. It is this financial stress which drives many of them to engage in unpaid labor that may ultimately make their situation more difficult, rather than less. Public housing for all low-income people that does not require a long-term waiting list nor automatically privileges applicants with children would increase the number of people who can access the social safety net when they need it.

Bolder recommendations for reforms that could relieve the pressure on the long-term unemployed would also include a guaranteed, universal income, as Nancy Fraser
has proposed as part of her vision for a “Universal caregiver welfare state” (2014: kindle 2978). Fraser has argued for a welfare state that does not distinguish between breadwinning and caregiving, but recognizes both market-rewarded labor and labor in the private home as forms of caregiving. State-funded supplements to those who perform care outside the market instead of within it would help to dismantle both gender and class-based inequalities associated with the type of work a person performs and the apparent value it is given by society.

In the current U.S. political landscape, such a massive and un-targeted welfare program seems far off, as most government programs face imminent threats of being further cut, rather than having any major momentum behind their growth. There are a variety of reforms, both large and small, that could begin to shrink the gap between those for whom the experience of unemployment drains them and those for whom it can launch back into the economy with more confidence in themselves, their families, and in the ideas that serve the logic of the austerity age that created this situation.

The more difficult question is not whether something could be done to remedy the polarization of unpaid labor, but about what it might take to produce the political capital and momentum to actually accomplish these goals in a political-economic environment so dominated by neoliberal ideologies of free-market individualism. Many have noted that the U.S. is unique among similarly wealthy industrialized nations in its history of low organization of the working-class. Recently, even as a few progressive politicians have attempted to tap into growing anger about the gap between rich and poor in the United States, the middle-class remains the most seemingly sympathetic subject on which calls
for reform are based. In 2014, for example, President Obama dedicated most of his State of the Union Address to the problem of income inequality. But as a solution he proposed a series of reforms and regulations he called “middle-class economics.”

Though the “middle class” has been a relatively safe group for politicians on both sides of the aisle to rally around over the last half-century of U.S. history, it seems that too many Americans who might benefit most from progressive economic reforms might, for the first time perhaps, be wondering whether they themselves qualify as the middle class. That amorphous, ill-defined, and politically divided middle class is more readily distinguished by what it is not, than what it actually is. The middle class is neither rich and secure nor poor and lazy. The middle class is worthy of political action on its behalf most especially because it is a class of people who work and make the best decisions they can in the circumstances they face. But in the face of vagabond capitalist economies, where jobs come and go, and local policies cater to creating that turbulence more than to helping those who are most impacted by it, this class may no longer be the best group to conjure and mobilize around. If indeed the lack of organization of the working class as a political bloc in the contemporary United States has been a barrier to the creation of a robust welfare state that can cushion people during the worst periods of capitalist cycles and during their own personal crises, then what can overcome these shortcomings?

The social reproduction framework is the very kind of approach, which might bridge the gap between the economic world participants in my study live in now and the one we want to see in the future, if it can be articulated as the basis for political alliances and for making political claims, rather than as a scholarly analytical framework alone.
For one, a political program built on basis of contributions individuals make, rather than their relative success as compared with more lowly workers has the potential to unite workers across the wealth, race, and gender spectrums.

The not-working, working class

So do we simply replace the middle class language with working class language? What would it mean to talk about the working class on the basis of its contributions to overall social reproduction, rather than its relationship to production? What about an approach to the working-class that takes that precarity as a given, as a starting point for making claims on the state or the market, precarity as something always-inherent to those who must sell their labor to survive, and where the only thing worse than being exploited by the capitalist system is not being exploited by that system, unemployment. What if instead of a working-class as made up of wage-workers, we saw the working-class as those who are fundamentally wageless, with the exception of periods of their lives in which they will have a wage? But instead of seeing this not-working class as unproductive, we focused on its reproductivity and productivity amidst precarity and wagelessness.

Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi argue that the social reproduction model reveals a need for a different vision of the working-class in order to combat the austerity and neoliberal agendas causing the increasingly normalized experience of precarity:

When we assume the perspective of social reproduction, we see that our basic state, so to speak, is not defined by a waged job, but rather
existential wagelessness. On the terrain of social reproduction it becomes abundantly clear that unemployment precedes employment, the informal economy precedes the formal, and proletarian does not mean wage worker.

The struggles at the level of social reproduction link with those in the fast food industry, agriculture, hospitals, universities, and logistics, attesting to the need for a unitary field of analysis and antagonism. The political question today is how to effectively articulate the plurality of struggles on these diverse terrains in a way that can begin the long process of building a new class power (2016).

Politically, in re-centering social reproduction in the analysis of capitalism, might we be able to forge a new working-class coalition based on their centrality to the overall reproduction of society rather than in the immediate of production and wages? And would this focus on reproduction not actually center those who do the most of that work, women, immigrants, people of color? The feminist social reproduction model might help us conceive of a working class that can also stake claims not built on victimhood and harm, but instead on their crucial position in the reproduction of the economy, on their value, their power, and their own consent to continue toiling in the conditions before them.
References


190


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Appendix A : Interview Guide

PABR (Person Affected By Recession) Interview Guide 3/20/13

I. Backstory (describe situation at the time of event and how they got to that position)
   1. Job / Career Trajectory
   2. Education
   3. Family situation (how did they divide labor, who lived at home, etc.)
   4. Consumption / Lifestyle
   5. Housing
   6. Finances

II. Events/Experiences of Downward Mobility (include thoughts, feelings and decision processes)
   1. Job Event(s)
   2. Finances (income, debt, social safety net, assets, etc.)
   3. Housing (if owned, did it drop in value?)
   4. Health

III. Responses to Downward Mobility and Outcomes of those Responses (include thoughts, feelings and decision processes)
   1. Economic Coping Responses (employment behavior as well)
   2. Consumption
   3. Housing
   4. Finances
   5. Family/Network relationships
   6. Division of labor (childcare/housework)
   7. Identity (father/husband/mother/wife/friend)
   8. Time use
   9. The future

Possible Probes:
   • What has been the hardest thing? The best thing?
   • What did your job mean to you?
   • Who do you talk to?

Demographic Info:
Age
Sex
Race

Family income at time of job event

Highest Educ

Spouse? Kids?

Spouses’ job and salary
Appendix B : Recruitment Flyer

Looking for Participants for a Research Study: Experiences of the Great Recession

In the past two years, has the poor economy affected you in any of the following ways?

- Have you...
  - lost a job?
  - experienced cuts in wages, hours, or benefits?
  - changed your buying patterns?
  - decided to go back to school?
  - postponed retirement, or changed your retirement plans?
  - had to "tighten your belt" in other ways?

- Are you interested in sharing your experiences with a researcher who is interested in learning about how the economic downturn is affecting your life?

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of people whose lives have been affected by the downturn in the economy. Study participants will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview at a time and place convenient for you. Interviews are expected to last about an hour, to 1 hour and 30 minutes at most. Your name and identifying information will be kept confidential.

If you are interested in participating or simply would like more information, please contact the primary investigator:

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