

We Need to Talk about Family

We Need to Talk about Family:

*Essays on Neoliberalism,
the Family and Popular Culture*

Edited by

Roberta Garrett, Tracey Jensen
and Angie Voela

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INTRODUCTION

“THE FANTASIES ARE FRAYING”: NEOLIBERALISM AND THE COLLAPSE OF A PROGRESSIVE POLITICS OF THE FAMILY

ROBERTA GARRETT, TRACEY JENSEN
AND ANGIE VOELA

We are the first generation in recent history that does not know if our children will have a better life than us. Over the past thirty years the dream of upward mobility, stable and securely paid employment, and the possibility of forming durable intimate relationships has dissipated. In Lauren Berlant’s words, the “fantasies are fraying” (2011, 3). The family, as we know, has only ever succeeded through a gendered and generational exercise of power under which some members flourish and others are exploited. Under the sexual division of domestic labour, the breadwinner—whose masculinity was confirmed and enhanced through his capacity to provide—required the unpaid and unrecognised domestic labour of his dependent wife in order for all the requirements of social reproduction to be achieved each day. Indeed the demands of twentieth-century democratic socialism for a “family wage”—a wage generous enough to sustain and reproduce the family—relied absolutely on the exploitation of women via this gendered division of labour.

Under neoliberalism the complex machinations of the nuclear family fantasy—a problematic space which relies on the exercise of such gendered and generational power, but also a space where political claims to a generous, stable, secure family wage can be made—have indeed started to fray. The extension of market forces and the search for evermore-elusive profit margins have taken their toll on labour. Workers have seen their wages stagnate during the final decades of the twentieth century, along with the erosion of worker benefits and rights. The pendulum of power has swung decisively away from labour and towards

capital. At one end of the spectrum, the intensification of work and the normalisation of long-hours working culture have undermined the time and energy available for private family life. At the other end, the rise of precarious, low-paid work, often without any guaranteed hours and with few employment securities (such as sickness or maternity benefits) has created additional pressures for workers.

The family has often been imagined as a potential tamer of markets: a haven in a heartless world and a site where equality and solidarity could be fostered in the next generation. As Nancy Fraser (2013) comments, second-wave feminism in particular imagined “the family” to be a site of patriarchal power—but one that could be transformed via collective, radical political action and sustained via the ethos of democratic socialism and its commitments to egalitarian redistribution. Just as this political climate sought to distribute individual value and material resources more equitably, along class lines, there was also a sense in which it could be harnessed to inculcate and foster a fuller sense of human potential, unrestrained by gendered norms and expectations. Neoliberalism, as Fraser notes, blew such dreams out of the water: free-market ideologies were “miraculously” resurrected after the fall of Communism and amplified by rampant globalisation. The resurrection of this ideology can be seen in the eruption of neoliberal family formations—the hypercompetitive, neotraditionalist mobile family seeking to capitalise on the uneven spread of resources in order to maximise the futures of its own children.

Concerns about the effects of neoliberalism-capitalism upon individuals and groups are not new. When Lasch examines the basic operating principles of American society in the *Culture of Narcissism* (1979) he describes a thriving, confident culture on its way to casting off its moorings to traditional authority and values. The phenomena described by Lasch—in spite of the limitations of his approach (Kilminster, 2008)—are not mere variations of laissez-faire liberalism and the pursuit of happiness, but radical revisions of established norms.

Sennett (1999, 2006) and Bauman (2007) express concerns about the erosion of individuality under capitalism and the growing discontent with modern life. Modern individuals struggle to keep up with the traditional dreams of success and affluence and have to grapple with the loss of the value of labour, the casualisation of the workforce, the rise of managerialism and the knowledge that everyone is expendable and replaceable.

In the political sphere, contemporary neoliberalism is widely examined as the legacy of Thatcher and Reagan, whose political visions of unfettered free-market economies were built on the solid foundations of the

biopolitical engineering Foucault so brilliantly discusses in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2004). Neoliberalism is usually defined as the expansion of economic thinking in all spheres of human activity, including the family, with emphasis on individualism and practices of extending and disseminating market policies to all institutions and forms of social action (Brown 2003). Neoliberalism is all or some of the following: an aggregation of ideas, a discursive formation, governmental programmes, an over-arching ideology, a hegemonic project, an assemblage of techniques and technologies for the formation of subjects. In that sense, we should think of neoliberalism not as a concrete doctrine but as “enabling certain behaviours and not others” (Gilbert 2003, 7). It is generally accepted that the “neo” in neoliberalism refers to the growth of the corporation and the corporate mentality (Hardin 2014, 215). Further, it is generally agreed that neoliberalism potentiates individuals, but discourages collectivity, is essentially antithetical to democratic values (Giroux 2005, 13) and is characterised by a loss of democratic and collective values and by intensive ideological manipulation (Brown 2006, 307).

Neoliberalism regularly promulgates the discourse that it is a self-evident and “inevitable” state of affairs— the only alternative (Giroux, 2005). This doxa, widely accepted and rarely questioned, goes hand in hand with the role of a state. The modern neoliberal state seems to have abdicated the traditional responsibility of taking care of its most vulnerable citizens, in direct proportion to engineering the responsible, entrepreneurial and financially independent ones. The individualistic conception of selfhood central to neoliberalism (Gilbert 2013, 11) accepts that an individual is both an ideal locus of sovereignty and a site of governmental intervention. The individual is a rational, calculating unit, looking after her or his own needs. Moral responsibility is equated to rational action. A “mismanaged” life is unacceptable (Brown 2003, 15). Despite being forged by rigid biopolitical processes, the individual is always seen as a free subject. Self-care and the ability to provide for one’s own needs are considered paramount (Brown 2006, 694). We are reminded at this point of the catastrophic effects of neoliberal austerity on families, communities and individuals, the growing indifference of the average individual for the other’s predicament, and the sense that there is no way out (Fischer 2009).

The dream of neoliberalism thus enables new kinds of fantasies, anxieties and defences. The family retreats into itself and becomes more atavistic and competitive. This is the impoverished psychosocial context in which family is emplaced. To take care of oneself and one’s family in the neoliberal sense means to create a realm of invulnerability, a denial of

mutual interdependence, a dis-engaged engagement with one's psyche and the world. Layton calls this attitude (after Rodger and Banfield) "amoral familialism". The latter is defined as "behaviour which follow[s] the dictum that the individual should maximise the material and short-run advantage of their nuclear family and assume that everyone else in the community w[ill] behave similarly" (2010, 312).

Neoliberalism as a failure of the caretaking social environment is not a private matter but a public one. It not only results in the traumatised patients seen in psychiatric clinics and therapists' offices but also in jaded "functional" citizens. It results in the explosion of hatred, phantasies of grandeur, persecution and superiority (Layton 2010, 309). It reactivates aggressive behaviours like nationalism, sexism and racism: regimes of inflexible binary thinking that produce a false sense of secure identity by excluding and excommunicating the vulnerable or repulsive Other. Considering neoliberalism as a failure of the caretaking environment does not absolve individuals of their own share of responsibility. Layton poignantly calls this "our mutual implication in each other's suffering" (2009), and speaks of a lack of accountability and empathy both at an individual and national level (2009, 106).

The Biopolitics of Neoliberalism

A key concern of this collection is to explore the ways in which intimate and domestic life serves as a crucial site for the exercise of biopolitical power; that is, forms of governance which operate through the administration and management of life force. Through regulating—and importantly, taming—"the family", reproductive power can be made docile and put to work under larger systems of labour power. By attending to the ways in which reproductive practices and family life come under scrutiny, surveillance and control, we can start to track how family regulation is put to work under neoliberalism.

These concerns about the biopolitics of family life have troubled theorists throughout the twentieth century. In *The Policing of Families*, Jacques Donzelot tracks the ways in which mothers are transformed into agents of the state, assisted by philanthropy, social work, mass education, family courts and psychiatry. He shows how nineteenth- and twentieth-century educational, judicial and medical discourses in France come to increasingly regulate and proselytise the normal and desirable family image and experience. Through such policing, the institution of the family becomes a crucial site for the extension of state power over workers and produces new figures in need of social control: such as the delinquent, or

“problem” child. Significantly, Donzelot highlights how such regulatory regimes have different consequences for working-class and bourgeois children: they are all equally surveilled by penal authority but the latter have access to extracurricular activities and investments which help guarantee the reproduction of privilege from one generation to the next. The family, then, is anything but a private institution but rather a key site of biopolitical power—in Donzelot’s words “a protector of private property, of the bourgeois ethic of accumulation, as well as the guarantor of a barrier against the encroachments of the state” (1997, 5). The family, as both “queen and prisoner” (7) of the social world, inhabits a contradictory position: one where it is denounced for its hypocrisy and egocentrism, marked by interminable and unending crisis and absolutely crucial to the exercise of state power over its citizens.

One motivating desire in this collection is to explore how these processes unfold under contemporary neoliberalism, in a context in which state power has ostensibly been rolled back and in which liberal freedoms have ostensibly been extended. Drawing on the insights of feminist political philosophers (notably Nancy Fraser), we have asked how has the crisis of the welfare state, brought about by the fracturing of a social democracy consensus and its supplanting by neoliberalism, effected the machinery of state power and its impact on families? How have central assumptions about labour markets and families been interrupted by neoliberalism? How has social policy geared towards family life been reimagined under neoliberalism? How has the biopolitics of the family been transformed by neoliberalism? To that end, our first section, *The Biopolitics of Neoliberalism*, includes seven very different chapters that explore how the dimensions of reproductive power and practices are lived, regulated, and resisted under neoliberalism.

In “24-Hour Nurseries: the Never-Ending Story of Care and Work”, Camille Barbagallo examines the recent demand for twenty-four-hour childcare. She makes her case with reference to the radical shifts in the labour landscape, the rise of untypical employment for women, the less-well-paid jobs mothers often have to accept, the gender gap in opportunities, the lack of support by formal or informal networks of support, and so on. She then turns to the past—precisely, to four decades ago—when flexible arrangements for working mothers and lone parents were an integral part of the feminist agenda. Drawing on qualitative research, as well as official reports and statistics, Barbagallo reveals the pressures, inequalities and insurmountable difficulties that once made round-the-clock childcare an important feminist issue. Fast-forward to the present-day: the picture does not seem to have changed all that much; if

anything it has become worse. Barbagallo demonstrates how neoliberalism emptied out the dream of “unchallengeable flexibility for mothers” as a socialist and utopian vision, replacing it with arrangements of reproductive and domestic labour that reinforce gender divisions, restrict women’s opportunities and ultimately reveal the present demand for twenty-four-hour childcare as an impossible solution for women in the workplace.

In “Invisible Labour: Care Provision for Infants and Children at UK Art Schools”, Kim Dhillon examines the failures of art schools and higher education institutions to provide adequate and sustainable childcare provision for students and teachers. Examining the hidden and counterarchives of the Royal College of Art, Dhillon reflects on the practical and informal strategies that were mobilised to make space for collective care and shows how progressive alternatives to current care arrangements came to be erased. Drawing on interviews with art school students, Dhillon exposes the impossibilities of being an art student with care obligations. Childcare—now more formalised and expensive—is increasingly erased from the institutional life of the art school, with children literally prohibited from entry. Under the current priorities of art school administration, Dhillon argues, it is outward-facing professional practice that is valued rather than the experimental infrastructures of everyday childcare that might help to enable art students with children to complete their course. She situates these histories and counterhistories of art colleges’ care provision within a broader crisis of access to the creative world and asks what kinds of demands and strategies might need to be articulated to address this.

In her chapter “‘Mother Work’, Education and Aspiration in British-Bangladeshi Families”, Rifat Mahbub draws on interviews with educated Bangladeshi-British mothers to explore the intensive “mother work” through which they demonstrate and perform their citizen value. Mahbub argues that Bangladeshi diasporic mothers are able to exercise agency and control (in contexts which continue to racially discriminate against them as professionals) by investing in their children’s educations, through acquisition of knowledge of the British education system and by developing their children’s confidence and educational capacity. Through such “mother work” Mahbub’s respondents can distinguish themselves from both “illegitimate migrants” and from working-class white mothers who fail to navigate the educational system with confidence.

In “Dutiful Sons and Debt: the Case of Chinese ‘Money Boys’”, Chia-Hung Benny Lu draws on his ethnographic work with the Money Boys of Shanghai. He examines how his respondents (a group of male sex workers) are engaged in forms of self-making and practices of “filial

selfhood”, which animate concepts of family debt, kinship and intergenerational obligation. He shows how such filial obligations are negotiated in a context of Chinese family biopolitics, characterised by intensified pressures to “save face” and under new conditions of precarity, insecurity and stigmatisation for migrant and queer sex workers.

In “Against Resilience”, Tracey Jensen examines how the measurement of child poverty has been undermined by policymakers, supplanted in part by neoliberal discourses of “resilience”. Such discourses direct public debate away from collective strategies aimed at tackling the scandals of inequality, and elevate the individualised, mobile and self-possessed “responsible family” as the neoliberal solution to inequality via their capacity to bounce back from insecurity and precariousness. Drawing on a case study of “resilience resistance”—the Focus E15 mothers of East London—Jensen explores how innovative and vibrant campaigning can incubate an exciting constellation of support, highlighting potential avenues for resistance and speaking back to neoliberal statecraft.

In “Understanding the Rise of ‘Neuroparenting’”, Jan MacVarish, Ellie Lee and Pam Lowe chart the eruption of neuroscience discourse across British social policy. They show how the “brain claims” of neuroscience and in particular the significance of “the first three years” in cementing the future capacities of children has been taken up across social work, midwifery, health visitor training and across parent-training programmes in ways that naturalise cyclical explanations of poverty and repeat the “child-saving” movements of the nineteenth century. Their critical reading of neuroparenting highlights the deeply problematic assumptions of parental deficit that underpin such policy shifts, as well as the ways in which particular groups are once again cast as “dysfunctional”.

In “Safe for Life: Neoliberalism and Mothers’ Milk”, Olivia Guaraldo examines the discourses around the importance of breastfeeding by drawing on Foucault’s notion of biopolitics. She starts with Adrienne Rich’s tenth-anniversary edition ([1976] 1986) of *From Woman Born* and uses this seminal feminist text and the ten-year span between the first and the anniversary edition as a guide to the changes that took place over that decade, before turning her attention to the present-day. Guaraldo traces the developments and tribulations of the feminist demand for breastfeeding and links it to feminist debates around taking care of, and being in control of, one’s own body. She then examines the early alliance in the US and Europe of feminist breastfeeding activism with mainstream activist groups like La Leche League. Guaraldo then examines how the medical profession and mainstream public opinion adopted a call for breastfeeding, but in ways that counteracted the feminist activists’ position on the issue.

She shows how breastfeeding began to be promoted as “natural”, “good” and, above all, an act of responsible mothering and citizenship. In that sense, Guaraldo documents not only the advent of neoliberal discourses but also, and crucially, the concurrent erosion of feminist ones. She also provides a clear overview of Foucault’s biopolitics and a clear link to the status of breastfeeding in the present day, in which the dominant view is that it is still widely seen as natural, “best for baby”, “doing one’s best for one’s child” and for the future healthy individual, and, of course, preserves the “mystique” surrounding the “mummy knows best” discourse of childrearing.

Mediating the Neoliberal Family

This collection discusses a mature phase of neoliberalism, and we argue that (after three decades of political and economic rationality, privatisation, deregulation and a rolling back and retrenchment of the state from social provision) the institution of the family has been thoroughly “neoliberalised”. In bringing together a body of research into the lived experiences, representations and psychic life of neoliberalism, we have sought to create a space in which to critically examine the shape and texture of the neoliberal subjects who are animated within discussion of the entanglements of familial relations. As such, we approach neoliberalism less as a consistent political ideology and more as a “sensibility” (Gill and Scharff, 2011)—that is to say: a set of pressures, constraints, influences and requirements.

The chapters in the section *Mediating the Neoliberal Family* consider how neoliberalism manifests in spheres and practices of mediation: via cultural scripts, contradictory discourses and technologies of self-making—all of which privilege and interpellate subjects who are rational, self-enterprising and calculating, and are shorn of wider social and collective obligations. The work of the contributors in this section stretches across generations and phases of neoliberalism, yet all remain immersed within it. This collection of chapters examines media and cultural forms circulating around the neoliberal family (both representational and self-representational) that reveal the contradictory interpellations of neoliberalism: to enjoy more, to consume more, to self-manage, to work and transform oneself and one’s family, to self-regulate, to submit to disciplinary technologies, to monitor and identify potential waste and deficiencies. These chapters examine a regime of desires and cultural discourses that create a feeling of impossibility for those enmeshed within them. Neoliberalism, as the chapters in this section show,

creates a kind of familial brittleness—a supplanting of more collective “porous” parenting and of familial subjects with a more atomised and competitive set of familial discourses. Such mediations expose the rationalist, competitive edge of how we create families in a time of diminishing social expectations (Bhattacharyya, 2015) and in a context underpinned by the withdrawal of security and the rolling back of the welfare state. The familial subjects who emerge through this neoliberalist discursive formation are marked by the tyranny of “choice”; even those who experience little in the way of either freedom or autonomy are exhorted to understand themselves in these terms. These chapters critically explore the costs and consequences of such incommensurability. They (along with the rest of this edited collection of essays) show the psychosocial and cultural life of neoliberalism, how neoliberal ideas are produced and circulated across media and culture and how such discursive formations “get inside” of us. From the nominally “open” but overwhelmingly middle-class-mother-focused social media sites discussed by Anneke Meyer and Katie Milestone, to the “mommyblogs” and vlogs addressed by Anija Dokter, this section explores how and where neoliberalism is congealing, its points of tension and attention, the moments where we become complicit or compliant to the demands and requirements of neoliberalism. This section also examines the representational politics of the neoliberal family on prime-time television, including fantasies of autonomous pro-natalist evangelical Christianity circulated on reality television (as discussed by J.A. Forbes) and how potentially radical families headed by gay fathers are sanitised and commodified via homonormativity in prime-time drama (as discussed by Clare Bartholomaeus and Damien W. Riggs). Across these cultural forms there remains a tacit knowledge that it are “good” familial choices and practices which produce happiness, security and success, and that failure and struggle can only be understood via discourses of individual pathology and deficiency.

In “Selling Heaven: Evangelical Natalism in *19 Kids and Counting*”, J.A. Forbes tracks the connections between neoliberalism, the Protestant work ethic, and eschatological evangelism, through a critical reading of the American reality television programme *19 Kids and Counting*, which follows the evangelical and “supersize” Duggar family. Examining the narrative of the programme, Forbes argues that *19 Kids and Counting* illustrates the normalisation in American popular media ecology of near-impossible exemplars of the family, reductively constructed as self-determining rather than interdependent. Forbes argues that present-day evangelical eschatology circulates powerful ideologies of thrift, hard work

and self-denial and he discusses how its iteration on reality television represents the pop mainstreaming of far-right natalist philosophy.

In the chapter “Homonormativity in Representations of Gay Fathers on Television: Reproductive Citizenship, Gender Roles and Intimacy”, Clare Bartholomaeus and Damien W. Riggs examine the everyday representational politics at play in four prime-time television programmes in which gay fathers are central characters: *Modern Family*, *The New Normal*, *Sean Saves the World* and *House Husbands*. All four programmes, the authors argue, reinforce and endorse neoliberal discourses about the family and seek to normalise a specific homonormative version fatherhood that is at ease with neoliberalism. What appears initially to be a new genre that pushes the frontiers of mainstream family television forward in paradigm-shifting ways is, Bartholomaeus and Riggs argue, actually a series of texts which reiterate dominant gender norms and which are both complexly conservative *and* progressive in their presentation of gay fathers, who are characterised in these shows by their habits of consumption and by their desexualisation. The authors trace how the complex and troubled fictional representations of gay fathers on television serve to regulate and instantiate markers of being a “good, neoliberal, reproductive citizen”.

In “The Lonely Cloud: Intensive Parenting and Social Media in Neoliberal Times”, Anneke Meyer and Katie Milestone examine how British mother-focused social media such as Mumsnet and Facebook shapes, invites and fuels practices of intensive parenting within the twin contexts of neoliberalism and postfeminism. As the authors demonstrate, the neoliberal imagination favours individual provision, self-reliance and responsibility over state intervention and collectivism, while postfeminism promotes empowerment through individual choice and consumer freedom. Social media, as Meyer and Milestone document, offers a cultural space for digital motherhood that is oriented towards neoliberal and postfeminist expressions of intensive parenting. Their analysis examines the part played by social media in a broader regendering of intensive parenting. The retreat of mothers into domestic space and the “rationalisation” of family life manifests as parents seek a competitive edge in a race for scarce resources. They show how mother-focused social media both shores up nuclear familial ideology and exposes the contradictory jarring of the values of such intensive parenting with neoliberalism.

In the chapter “Birthing Babies in the Blogosphere: An Analysis of Gendered Labour and Entrepreneurial Motherhood in Cyberspace”, Anija Dokter examines the neoliberal textures of the practices of “mommyblogging” and specifically of video-blogging (“vlogging”) birth. Examining media and public debate about birth-bloggers and birth-vloggers, Dokter exposes

the circuits of disdain and vitriol that circulate around the “mommyverse”, accusations of “overshare” and exhibitionism, and the devaluation of online maternal self-expression. Dokter’s analysis argues that birth-bloggers and -vloggers are engaged in a complex set of practices that subvert maternal ideals of modesty, silence, and selflessness even as they appear to naturalise neoliberal values through the construction and display of entrepreneurial subjectivities. She situates these practices within a broader marketisation of motherhood and childbirth and in developing a critical account of the economics of mommyblogging, she offers an innovative account of how mothers participate in and resist systemic inequalities that devalue and disparage them. Dokter argues that we must recognise the unpaid emotional labour, the fears and anxieties surrounding birth and the abject maternal body, the pressures to optimise and capitalise on intimate moments, and the class/gender nexus of exploitation within which the practices of mommyblogging and vlogging are situated.

Maternal Reflections: Anxiety and Ambivalence

Feminist critiques of the patriarchal, capitalist construction of motherhood stretch back into the roots of Enlightenment thought and the birth of modern Western feminism. Not surprisingly, resistance to the hegemonic mothering role emerged in tangent with the rising eighteenth-century cult of domestic life and the romantic idealisation of childhood. The figure of the tender, demure and self-sacrificing mother was the visible face of an underlying gender/class ideology in which affluent mothers were essentially recruited by the (expanding) nation state in order to contain and control the threat of working-class femininity, thereby solidifying existing class-power relations in a time of increasing radicalism and political dissent (Donzelot 1997, Abrams 2002, McRobbie 2013). Protest against both the ideology of compulsory motherhood and the valorisation of a particularly limiting and class-bound version of this role has been a constant theme within women’s political struggles and creative expression ever since. Nevertheless, there are certain cultural and historical moments in which the dominant values, attitudes and social practices in and through which mothering takes place become so onerous and antipathetic to women’s socio-economic status and psychological well-being that feminist scholarly attention is forcefully directed towards this issue.

The immediate aftermath of World War Two (in which women were strong-armed back into the domestic sphere after the relative freedoms and possibilities of the war years) incubated the wave of resistance to the consumer-led construction of the suburban housewife/mother figure of the

1950s in second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. In the last two decades, the neoliberal repudiation of post-war social democracy and welfarism has both intensified state and media interest in different parenting styles and vastly increased divisions of wealth and status between mothers of the different social classes. Withering state support for mass education and health provision, alongside the creeping normalisation of vast inequalities at every level of human experience, has been accompanied by the forceful promotion of a culture which blames and shames the poorest of families and the most disempowered of mothers (Tyler 2008, Jensen 2012). As many of the contributions to this volume demonstrate, there is little question that the neoliberal rhetoric of self-governance, choice and individualism has worked to polarise public perceptions of mothers and mothering practices along class lines. While post-war popular culture was often patronising and sexist in its sitcom/soap opera depiction of working-class mothers (e.g. as good-hearted, domesticated drudges), from the late 1990s onwards poorer mothers were openly vilified. Government rhetoric and popular representations joined forces in depicting “underclass” mothers as ignorant, slovenly and lacking in maternal feeling. In contrast, middle-class mothers were deemed to have the required levels of (expert-led) knowledge, skills and ambition to steer their charges towards sound psychological and physical development and educational and career success. As the chapters in this section make abundantly clear, middle-class mothers are also those that enjoy access to a variety of modes of self-expression and representation. However, as we will see, they rarely appear to relish their assigned role as privileged guardians of the neoliberal family.

If there is one theme that dominates the contributions to this section, it is dark cycle of anxiety, guilt and resentment that recurs insistently in accounts of modern motherhood. Such themes occurs even—or perhaps especially—in accounts produced by the kind of affluent, educated “yummy mummies” who are imagined as “smug” and “self-satisfied” in their role.

In “The New Tie that Binds: Helicopter Parenting in the Culture of Postmodernism”, Karen L. Lombardi examines Amy Chua’s controversial maternal memoir/parenting guide *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Lombardi unravels the contradictions within Chua’s text, exploring and contextualising the guilt and ambiguity that underlie Chua’s clumsy and blustering endorsement of “pushy parenting”. Lombardi’s thoughtful treatment of Chua’s much-reviled work eschews personal criticism in favour of a measured analysis of the determining factors that have given rise to both a particular mode of hypercompetitive parenting and a

groundswell of unease regarding the psychological effects of such methods. As Lombardi demonstrates, Chua's ethnicity and her teeth-gritting determination to orchestrate her children's success may have become the focal point of social ambivalence towards "intensive" mothering, but its origins lie in a range of neoliberal socio-economic policies that have destroyed middle-class parents' confidence in their children's future, breeding desperation and mutual suspicion.

In her chapter "Cavorting in the Ruins? Truth, Myth and Resistance in Contemporary Memoirs", Roberta Garrett continues this section's analysis of contemporary maternal reflections through a close textual analysis of two controversial maternal memoirs penned by neomodernist female writers: Julie Myerson's *The Lost Child* and Rachel Cusk's *Aftermath: on Marriage and Separation*. While both writers were accused of cashing in on their failure to maintain the "perfect" middle-class, neotraditional family (Myerson's teenage son becomes a heavy drug user, Cusk's marriage ends in divorce and lone parenthood) Garrett's reading suggests that the outrage produced by these texts was provoked more by their distanced and critical relationship to the neoliberal mothering role than their writerly exploitation of intimate material. Garrett highlights the presence of a "frame" narrative in each text—one (Myerson's) historical and biographical and the other (Cusk's) mythical and literary—in which contemporary "common-sense" attitudes towards parenting and the promotion of a particular form of hyperprotective, "wholesome" middle-class family life are tested, and found wanting.

In "Reconstructing the Neo-Indian Mother Through Memoir", Sucharita Sarkar addresses the experience of affluent Indian mothers. The chapter cautions us against regarding such parenting practices and their attendant maternal dilemmas as exclusively Western phenomena. Sarkar traces the dissolution of the traditional Indian family due to the effects of globalised neoliberal policies and the media's emphasis on the "new" Indian woman. Her framing commentary indicates that, despite brimming with an optimism rare in Anglo-American accounts of modern motherhood, Indian mothers face a double dose of mothering pressure. While the older idea of the self-sacrificing mother is still redolent within Indian culture, this is now twinned with a neoliberal emphasis on performativity and self-governance at number of levels. Sarkar's diarists are acutely aware of the increasing pressure to remain glamorous and alluring after childbirth and to display competence in micromanaging a range of children's activities while still pursuing a professional career. Sarkar's perceptive reading highlights the resentment and anxiety that regularly pierces the surface of

the diary accounts, despite their nominal reiteration of the celebratory public rhetoric regarding women's increased choices in neoliberal India.

In the final chapter in this section, “‘Just What Kind of Mother Are You?': Neoliberal Guilt and Privatised Maternal Responsibility in Recent Domestic Crime Fiction”, Ruth Cain broadens our survey of maternal writing from popular memoirs to a cycle of popular fiction in which many of the same themes recur. Cain's chapter on the domestic crime novel defines and dissects this recent trend in the popular crime genre, in which the guilt and resentment so characteristic of maternal diaries and memoirs becomes the plot driver for the darkest of domestic fantasies. As Cain argues, in novels such as Sophie Hannah's *A Room Swept White* or Paula Daly's *Just What Kind of Mother Are You?*, children are often the victims of the maternal resentment and aggression generated by heightened pressures and a lack of psychological and emotional support. The punishment for maternal failure is not only the public humiliation and “mother shaming” which haunts middle-class maternal writings, but the possibility of imprisonment or death.

This section of the volume highlights both the overwhelmingly middle-class basis of maternal self-representation within neoliberal culture; its central preoccupations; and the guilt, anxiety and resentment that neoliberal mothering produces even for its most privileged subjects.

The Psychic Life of Neoliberal Families

Whether we examine neoliberalism theoretically or in its concrete articulations, it is important to understand how *the psyche* experiences and responds to the mental representations of the contemporary dominant socio-economic and cultural system. Two approaches are relevant to the present volume and are mentioned here to provide necessary context for the papers in the psychoanalytic section entitled: *The Psychic Life of Neoliberal Families*; namely, a Lacanian approach developed by Žižek (1999) in his account of the effects of the decline of traditional paternal authority in contemporary modernity, and an object relations approach that considers contemporary behaviours as defences against the trauma of neoliberalism (Layton 2009, 2010).

Žižek draws on Lacan, for whom the formation of the bourgeois nuclear family resulted in the convergence and eventual merging of the two aspects of the Father: the *pacifying* Ego-Ideal (put simply: the *positive, creative* superego) and the *ferocious* superego. In simple terms, this means that the socio-symbolic order and the authority of the Father (or, his role as guarantor of law and order) are dependant upon belief—

specifically, upon all of us believing in authority, an inclination Žižek does not hesitate to call “a symbolic fiction” (1999, 369). The fundamental shift in contemporary modernity is that belief in authority has been irreparably eroded.

However, Žižek is careful not to blame modern malaise on a lack of strong paternal figures. The propensity to see through authority, the ability to see that the Other (Father / social order) does not pull the strings of our very existence (1994, 58), is always a radical and liberating insight. The big challenge, of course, is what we do with the knowledge that “the Other does not exist”—that is, that the social-cultural-political sphere is fluid and to a large extent, inconsistent. Modern culture is plagued by the failure to recognise the radical potential of this realisation, and by the effects of its denial.

In this section we explore manifestations of the collapse of symbolic authority in modern culture. For the moment, let us call its effects by the collective name “loss of symbolic efficiency” (Žižek 1999, 328). The key Lacanian argument is that the loss of symbolic efficiency produces regressions to earlier sadistic, masochistic and aggressive modes of enjoyment (*jouissance*). This is because the decline of the Father who represents “no” (i.e. prohibition) makes enjoyment difficult, if not impossible. To put this another way, the eradication of the figure that represents prohibition does not mean that everything—every form of enjoyment—is permissible. If no Oedipal prohibition is set in place (in triadic terms, if there is no separation of the child from the mother, or immediate gratification with no delay or sublimation), then enjoyment becomes problematic. At an individual level, the decline of authority has various effects. Symbolically, prohibitive norms are increasingly replaced by imaginary ideals. Injunctions to “be yourself” and “achieve your potential” have become mantras of neoliberal culture, yet often result in very contrary effects: a sense of personal crisis, uncertainty, and the undertaking of frantic activities to fill the void (Žižek, 1999).

A different approach to neoliberalism is offered by Layton (2009, 2010). Drawing on the psychoanalytic tradition of Winnicott and Bollas, and especially on the human need for containment and the capacity to bear frustration, Layton proposes that we should see neoliberalism as the systematic failure of a caretaking environment. For Layton, collective identities are forged in particular historical moments under particular conditions and in relation to other identities. At the same time, every culture produces norms of recognition (Butler, cited in Layton 2009, 113), i.e. “normative unconscious processes” (114). Such norms are rarely internalised or altered without conflict, especially at times of momentous

socio-economic change. Contemporary neoliberalism is such a time, and a particularly difficult and traumatic one. The weakening of intermediary institutions, rising poverty and inequality, and the increasing precarity of everyday life mean that we are now in the grip of a terrorised state of mind (Hall et al. 2013). In other words, we are becoming *used* to being traumatised.

To approach neoliberalism as a systematic failure of the caretaking environment (Layton 2010, 308) means to see it as failing to provide the containment we need, both as babies and as adults, in the social environment. The reaction to trauma is important in psychoanalysis. Traumatized individuals often chose to ignore or repress their painful experiences, resorting to denialism, disavowal and fantasies—all regularly observed as responses to the uncertainties of contemporary life. Confronted with an unbearable situation, the ego splits in the process of defence (Freud 1991b). Separating and disavowing the painful part allows for temporary peace of mind—an ultimately perverse solution to social trauma (Layton 2010, 304–6). Disavowal (i.e. simultaneously *knowing-and-not-knowing*) is a bid to contain anxiety by turning away from the truth. Layton draws our attention to the scope of this defensive stance: our capacity to hallucinate our way out of painful tensions (306), she notes, can be a source of creativity, “but when that capacity becomes a regularly practised disavowal of the truth of dependence, interdependence and vulnerability, we have the makings of a perverse situation [...] this is precisely the situation created by neoliberalism, and more recently by neoconservatism” (Layton 2010, 306).

Considering the demise of the traditional role of authority and the failure of the caretaking social environment, the psychoanalytic chapters of the present volume explore shifts in the patterns of desiring, variations in enjoyment and the changing dynamics of the Oedipus complex in the neoliberal family.

In “*The End of Alice, Not the End of the Oedipus Complex*”, Erica D. Galioto offers a Lacanian reading of A.M. Homes’ novel *The End of Alice* (1996). The novel focuses on the correspondence between Chappy, a paedophile prisoner in his fifties, and a nineteen-year-old girl who plans to seduce a younger boy (her twelve-year-old neighbour). Galioto proposes and successfully shows that the two characters are not so much isolated products of dysfunctional families or private pathologies, as average products of widespread psychosocial shifts. Because of neoliberalism’s desire to promote individualism and demote the authority of the Lacanian big Other, the latter no longer has the power it once had to confer identity. As a result, the individual (subject) is always uncertain about her or his

place and constantly tries to define herself/himself. More important, because of the removal of the paternalistic relationship between state and society, neoliberal post-Oedipal family dynamics only achieve *anti-paternal* relationships between parents and children. Individuals and groups therefore think that, or are thought to, uphold the Law, while their practices reveal a regressive descent into sadistic and masochistic patterns—whether in engagement with one another, or in relations of enthrallment. The latter is exemplified in the master-apprentice relationship in *The End of Alice* between Chappy and the (unnamed) girl—a dyad making up their own rules of inter-subjective communication, libidinal exploration and enjoyment as they go along.

In “‘Western Civilisation Must Be Defended’: Neoliberal Values in Teenage Literature”, Angie Voela examines the relationship between the father and the son of Rick Riordan’s (2005) teenage fantasy *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. In this novel, neoliberal principles merge with neoconservative imperatives which bind together “family form, consumer practices, political passivity and patriotism” (Brown, 2006, 701). In *Percy Jackson*, the young twelve-year-old hero Percy learns that his biological father is the god Poseidon. He is transported to Camp Half-Blood, a camp of children like himself, soon to be dispatched on a mission to find the bolt of Zeus in order to avert a war between the Olympians and a consequent annihilation of human civilization. Two characteristics are particularly noteworthy, argues Voela: the detached, harsh superegoic qualities of the father (Poseidon) and the gradual submission of the son (Percy) to the father’s desire. This new father-son relationship is a marked departure from the widely accepted belief that all individuals must achieve psychic independence from their parents. The proposed new arrangement, justified by a state of emergency brought on by the imminent threat to the West, effectively requires that the son remains attached to the father.

The restructuring of the father-child relationship shows that neoliberalism is unable to offer a helpful response to the classic Oedipal questions: “who am I?” and “what am I (in relation to my parent’s desire)?” and, by extension, “what is my place in the world of symbolic relations?”. Responses such as “you are nobody”, or “you are a mere mortal” do not foster individuality. At the same time, fantasies of clandestine armies of combat-ready youths undermine the principles of civic transparency and democracy.

One is tempted to ask at this point if a good or even a (drawing on Winnicott) “good-enough” parent-child relationship is possible under neoliberalism. The possibility of such a relationship is examined by Louis Rothschild in his chapter “What’s Awesome? Coercive Elements and the

Threat of Child Sacrifice in *The Lego Movie*". *The Lego Movie* is a story within a story. The animated part focuses on the adventure of young Emmet, a Lego figure and worker who lives in an indifferent, apolitical and anxiety-free universe. Emmet's life changes the day he falls through a crack in the floor to a different Lego world. He is sought after, and more or less forced to join a resistance movement against Lord Business, the boss who runs Emmet's world and who plans to immobilise it by permanently gluing all the Lego pieces in place. In the film's live-action (i.e. non-animated) scenes, Emmet and his plastic friends are toys in the hands of a young boy who plays in the basement of his family home with an elaborate set of Lego buildings, which belong to his father. The son's imaginative play is an attempt to register his discontent with the father's restrictions.

Rothschild's reading of the Lego movie operates on two levels. On the one hand, it examines the unfolding of Emmet's story as the gradual awakening of an indifferent mind and the transformation of a hesitant follower of instructions into a confident, innovative builder. On the other hand, it explores the conditions under which the diegetic live-action father and son may build a relationship that can evolve and flourish unimpeded, not fixed by the "glue" of too many inflexible regulations. Drawing on British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, Rothschild considers children's play as a safe environment in which creative and destructive tendencies are situated and transformed within an evolving social network. The *Lego Movie*'s live-action boy faces an equally formidable task: how to extend a compelling but, at the same time, peaceful demand to the father to be more understanding and flexible. Rothschild shows that both father and son must work together towards that end. An effective break with neoliberalism is seen, in this text, not as a new, secret bond between the father and the son (something that would not escape the confines of amoral familialism) but as the flexibility of the Law, and the narrative suggests that when the Law is bereft of good grace, or a spirit of flexible generosity, people are immobilised, or "glued", into a frozen universe.

This Collection

In putting together this collection, our aim has been to draw together insights from across our shared disciplines of cultural studies, literary theory, psychoanalysis, psychosocial studies, social policy and sociology in order to explore the amoral familialism of the neoliberal moment. Our Call for Papers generated an ambitious collection of work, which explores the social and psychosocial formations of amoral familialism, the

psychoanalytic inner life of neoliberalism, and a rich and troubled field of cultural representations and mediations.

The chapters in this collection signal the trouble with the neoliberal family: in particular, the gulf between the conditions of family life and the formation of new fantasies. Neoliberalism has always been split between socio-economic realities and the expectations of where we “should” be. The *obligation* to enjoy means we are always living in a state of deferral: with the anxiety of being left behind, and with the hope that the best is yet to come, a condition described as “cruel” by Berlant (2011). The cruel optimism fostered by neoliberalism is also deeply nostalgic about family and seeks to retrieve the imagined family of the past. The chapters in this collection resonate and congeal around these troubled feelings of disaffection and nostalgia. It is evident that many long for a new politics of the family, one that can resist the neoliberal pull towards atavism, isolation and competitiveness while also offering more than just a *marginally* less sexist or less homophobic reformulation of the traditional family. The work in this collection can only begin to address this project. Nevertheless, the range and breadth of the cultural forms addressed here provide a much-needed corrective to the somewhat androcentric critical emphasis on the macrostructures and systems of the neoliberal world. Neoliberalism is reshaping relationships and fantasies at the most personal and intimate level, and can only be resisted through a sustained critical engagement with the specific cultural relationships, processes and forms through which this expressed and perpetuated.

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THE BIOPOLITICS OF NEOLIBERALISM

CHAPTER ONE

24-HOUR NURSERIES: THE NEVER-ENDING STORY OF CARE AND WORK

CAMILLE BARBAGALLO

‘Childcare’ has the ring of something closed-off, finished, which some people—mostly mothers—know all too much about, and from which other people shy prudently away (Denise Riley 1983a).

In June 2012, the Russell Hill Road Day Nursery in Purley opened its doors, registered to provide care for fifty-six children from six months to five-years-old. However, unlike other childcare settings, Russell Hill is registered to provide overnight care for up to twelve children per night (Morton 2012). The nursery’s overnight services run from 7 p.m.–7 a.m., which in effect means that the nursery provides 24-hour childcare. For those familiar with the history of British feminism and the original demands of the Women’s Liberation Movement, the news that 24-hour childcare is finally available, nearly forty years after feminists first raised the demand, could be noted as yet another win for the feminist movement. In many ways, the availability of 24-hour childcare is testament to the significant impact that feminism has had: we have, as is often claimed, come a long way. At the same time, the provision of 24-hour childcare delivered by the ever-growing privatised for-profit care market, points to complex contradictions at play in what appear as choices, but are often experienced as less than ideal solutions for working parents, and in particular working mothers. These tensions are at the centre of this chapter, which tells a story, in three parts, detailing how both feminism and neoliberalism have reconfigured the practices and processes of caring for children as well as the organisation of work and family.

The story begins at the 24-hour nursery and asks why any parent would want or need a 24-hour nursery. The increasing necessity for 24-hour care disrupts the notion of choice that is often implied in childcare provision