Introduction

Let me begin with a story. I am in the waiting room at the pediatrician's office with my kid for a routine checkup, helping him with a learn-to-read app on the iPad and feeling frustrated that the doctor is taking so long, because I need to go to work. Every minute spent here tacks time on to how long I will have to stay when I finally get back to my desk. I look around the packed room at people waiting in line with camp physical forms; a dad helping a ten-year-old with her school project on a laptop; two immigrant moms addressing their kids alternately in English and a second language, one in Spanish, the other in Arabic. In an alcove partly separated from the main room, I see a sick kid leaning on her mom and reading *Diary of a Wimpy Kid,* while next to me, a heavily tattooed young couple is hovering nervously over their few-weeks-old baby.

Maybe because my paid job involves teaching and I am helping my little one learn, suddenly the carefully cultivated separation between "working" and "not-working" slips for me. *I am doing work right now, and so are all these other people.* I look around again, noticing how some of us are intensively engaged in cultivating access to

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the middle class—providing our kids with technology and camps for "enrichment" (and child care while we're at work and school is out). But not all of us in this waiting room are middle-class, and we're all engaged in the reproduction of things we value. For starters, life itself: all of these children's health and continued vitality depend intensely on the care, concern, and material resources we bring them. Even as we wait in the doctor's office, we are engaged in the social reproduction of language, literacy, culture, comfort, sociability. It is such concrete, tangible labor by so many people. When social scientists theorize what is public and what is private, what work is, what the economy is, how does all this reproductive labor just drop out? What makes this a *private* sphere? As anthropologist Sarah Franklin said, "How is the constant, enduring, and world-historical significance of this reproductive labor constantly relegated to near invisibility?"[1]

In calling this work "reproductive labor," Franklin is drawing on a long intellectual tradition in feminism and on the left. Reproductive labor is the work necessary to the reproduction of human life—not only having and raising children but also feeding people; caring for the sick, the elderly, and those who cannot work; creating safety and shelter; building community and kin relationships; and attending to people's psychic and spiritual well-being. Most reproductive labor is done by people understood to be women, and because it is historically unpaid work—critical to the production and maintenance of a labor force but outside the formal system of work, wages, and production—we often think of it as belonging to a private sphere—the opposite of the public, where politics and economics live.

I want to turn this story on its head. Not only is reproductive labor real, concrete, and important, but it's actually crucial—not just to households but to politics. When we think about the major

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questions that have animated political debate in the United States in the past half century, what comes to mind? Welfare, immigration, policing, schools, abortion, reproductive technology? All of these are reproductive politics questions. Not just abortion, reprotech, and K-12 education, which of course couldn't be anything else, but all these and a great many others—gay marriage, civil rights and the long Black freedom movement, social security and pensions, and the foreclosure crisis have reproductive politics at their core or as a critical component. When we talk about race on the left, we talk about police shooting young people of color, a conversation developed vigorously in recent years in relationship to the Movement for Black Lives. When the right talks about race and poverty, it is about teen pregnancy, fatherless families, and welfare—the great debate in the 1990s about whether some mothers could stay home with their children, or everyone had to go out and get a McJob. When Donald Trump, vying for the Republican presidential nomination, first hit the front page of every paper in 2015 and generated Twitter storms, it was by saying that Mexico was sending "rapists" to the United States. Aside from strumming an old string in US politics by seeming to defend a violated, victimized (white) womanhood from a racialized other (the lynching story, or before that, the Indian captivity narrative), he also got it wrong in an interesting way: the majority of migrants from Mexico to the United States are women, in significant part because changes in reproductive labor in the United States have made the work of caring for the house, the children, the elderly, and people with disabilities something that, increasingly, someone had to be hired to do—and Latinas, in particular, got those jobs.

Our public conversations about race, immigration, and same-sex marriage center around questions of children, households,

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and families. (Or, to put it the other way, our conversations about reproductive politics are deeply about race, just as they are about sexuality.) When we think about feminism and careers, abortion, and assisted reproduction, it is perhaps more obvious that we are talking about reproduction, but I want to argue that we are thinking as much about the politics of how to *raise* children and the economy at large as we are the simple facts of pregnancy and birth. When we talk about the economy, we are talking about reproductive politics, because families and households are where we live our economic situation. Reproductive politics are, in fact, powerfully central to everything else we talk about in the United States—whether we look to wealth and poverty, schools and policing, financial speculation in the housing market (and single mothers as a particular niche market to be targeted for subprime mortgages), or even foreign policy (think about overpopulation and development, international adoption, the ever-renewable fight about aid funding for birth control and abortion, or burqas and the politics of modest dress and family relations in the Islamic world). In the United States, this book will argue, there is no outside to reproductive politics, even though that fact is sometimes obscured.

Also, I want to pause here and say a word about language. I am struggling with words like "women" and "mothers" in this book. After all, not just women get pregnant; so do transmen. The trans movement has urged us to use gender-neutral language, like "pregnant people" and "parent," or at least mark the ways that women are produced as cisgendered. Perhaps these would have been better choices for this book. But I have not been able to make this language work, tripping over the other sets of meanings they inadvertently generate. First, "pregnant people" and "non-pregnant people" was also a conservative language for

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denying protections against pregnancy discrimination in the workplace by insisting that it is not a form of sex discrimination that would be illegal under the Equal Protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Instead, as these commentators argued in an important Supreme Court case, *Geduldig v. Aiello,* as long as all "pregnant people" and "non-pregnant people" are treated the same, it's not sex discrimination to refuse benefits to pregnant people.[2] This argument seems like pure sophistry to me, and it's what stops me every time I hear "pregnant people." Second, at no point in the debates I discuss in this book am I certain that the "women" and "mothers" being spoken to or about are, in fact, exclusively cisgendered. However grotesquely misnamed or mischaracterized, transmen are woven through these stories. Much of what interests me in this book is the ways the category of woman is being enacted or broken apart into unstable pieces, particularly in and through race. What is indispensable to my thinking and borrowed from transgender studies scholarship is that gender is being produced and maintained as a site of inequity in part through trans-specific oppression, and that a binary understanding of gender is an indispensable part of the infrastructure of policy and economy, households and reproductive labor. In fact, this book could not exist without that thought.

Another story. I am standing on the playground years earlier. My kid is still in diapers, and I am talking to other parents of small children. We're comparing notes about how we are managing the work/child care/money problem that is somehow much worse than any of us expected. Day care costs upwards of $16,000 a year per kid, even when we could find a slot and figure out how to have a job with the 9-to-3 hours (or even 9-to-12, someone points out. What do they think? We're trying to go to *yoga?*). Most of us have decided to have one parent at least partly

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out of the formal workforce, home doing reproductive labor instead of making money to support our household. As far as I can tell, we're all thrilled that we have our kids, but we didn't realize how serious the career and financial ding was going to be. Nobody really anticipates that in five or ten years the parents who opted for less money and less ("real") work will readily go back to their chosen field, or if they were never exactly in a career before, even a job as good as the one they left. A professional career, or even just earning a steady income, is something you go at full tilt or accept the consequences. Given the high cost of day care, we swallow hard and live with it.

This book narrates how we got to this point—how did it get so hard to figure out how to both earn enough to eat and take care of children, elders, neighborhoods, and communities? In the last half century, reproductive labor has become simultaneously more important than ever (as public support is reduced) and harder to find the time and the space to do. Even the irritatingly individualizing corporate phrase "work-life balance" (oh, I see, the problem is just that I have to have better balance … yeah, right) implicitly acknowledges that it's a high-wire act. Declining real wages, longer work hours, and reduced government support for children, mothers, and elders have made families and households in their many configurations more important to the well-being of those who can't care for and support themselves independently—which is to say, all of us, at some points in our lives. Since the late 1970s, real wages have stagnated for nearly all workers (90 percent) and incomes have declined for men as a group,[3] forcing households to put ever more people in the workplace to maintain standards of living even as we have to figure out how to do all that care work. In heterosexual families, this means women—mothers, the caretakers for elders and people who have

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disabilities that keep them out of the formal labor force and/or need support for tasks of daily living—work. It also means that households use debt as a way to leverage standards of living—credit cards, then second mortgages and home equity loans, and especially as access to unsecured credit has declined since 2008, student loans being leveraged to support family members. You could say that as real wages have stagnated or declined since 1980, families have thrown everything they have at the problem of staying in the middle class: first mothers, then the house, then college students.

The same forces that have eroded wages have also taken away a lot of the "free" reproductive labor—housewives or elders who used to have pensions, for example, are much more likely to be in the work force than they were in the middle of the twentieth century. Everyone is in the formal labor force if they possibly can be, whatever that means about cramming reproductive labor into leftover time around the edges. Leisure time is evaporating, and most middle-class households are relying heavily on credit markets. In 1960, 20 percent of mothers worked. Today, 70 percent of US children live in households where all the adults are employed.[4] In 2008, US Americans reported, on average, just 16 hours of leisure time a week, 10 hours less than when Harris started tracking that number in 1973. If you eliminate those older than forty-three, adults work an average of 50–55 hours a week.[5] Even early in the shift to longer work days—before the delirious 1990s—parents began to report having less and less time to spend with their children; that time declined by 10 hours between 1960 and 1986.[6]

There is a reason we have talked so endlessly in the United States about reproductive politics over the past half century: the time to do reproductive labor is being shut down as a result of broad political and economic changes that have transformed the

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relationship of business, government, and households. That's what we were talking about on the playground that day. Care labor has been intensely privatized—there's not even a pretense anymore that businesses should pay a "family wage" or protect workers' reproductive health or that government ought to be concerned about the well-being of communities, families, children, or elders. The idea that there should be a federal Children's Bureau seems decidedly archaic. Instead, every family and household has the private responsibility to figure out how to support dependents and enable them to survive and thrive, even as they do so on an uneven playing field constructed by both business and government.

Since the 1970s, the United States and much of the rest of the world have been having a significant political fight about privatization of all kinds. It is about a political-economic system that Latin Americans and Europeans call "neoliberalism" and we used to call "Reaganomics" and now just call the "free market." Another version—the one that animated Donald Trump's 2016 political campaign—is "globalization," the concern about free trade agreements and immigrants, but that is an oversimplification of what has changed in the last half century. (The word "globalization" was also chosen by that campaign to gesture toward the anti-globalism of the white nationalist right—the a fear of world government that reaches back to the John Birch Society's opposition to membership in the United Nations and beyond.) The problem, I argue, is not so much free trade per se, much less immigration, but rather the broader neoliberal system in which they are embedded. As I will discuss in chapter 1—and actually throughout the book—neoliberalism is a political revolution that began in the late 1970s in the United States, in which corporate America and Wall Street have reset government priorities to shrink spending

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on the well-being of actual humans—from schools to housing to child welfare programs like AFDC—in order to keep corporate taxes low and profits high. Tax cutting and budget cuts are the result of a struggle to make government smaller and to devolve its responsibilities onto families and other civic institutions. Conservatives began during the Reagan administration to succeed in privatizing dependency, making children, elders, and the well-being of households and communities into individual problems.

One of the stunning moral low points of neoliberalism was in 2005, when Fox News network's Bill O'Reilly went off about people trapped on their roofs after Hurricane Katrina, saying that they were the perfect example of bad personal and educational choices—people trapped between the disaster of the Army Corps of Engineers' failed levees and Mayor Ray Nagin's refusal to commit the money to enact the evacuation plans for those without cars or credit cards, who could not just leave and check into a hotel. O'Reilly called it a "teachable moment"—and suggested showing videos of trapped and dead people floating in the water in New Orleans to school-aged children with the question "Do you want to be poor?" as if poverty were just a foolish decision.[7] Welfare reform was a key early issue for neoliberalism's inauguration as state policy in the United States, because only by making the case that supporting the care of small impoverished children was a state responsibility could one argue for privatizing everything else—pensions and social security, health care, education, even public safety (by putting guns in the hands of every individual).

While many scholars and activists have told the story of how neoliberalism has changed our political and economic system, this book tells that story from inside families. Although large-scale changes in the economy or politics often seem abstract (at least until your manufacturing job moves from the United States

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to Mexico), they touch us every day. It's not (just) that your partner is a jerk and didn't start the laundry last night, or your kid dawdles horribly about getting his coat on to go to school, or that your mother fell again but is being ridiculously stubborn about even thinking about moving, it's that these little things have become impossible stress storms because only a very few of us any longer have the time or resources to do reproductive labor while also earning the wages it takes to keep us all alive, never mind thriving. These seemingly trivial household fights over reproductive labor are where neoliberalism lives in our daily lives. And, at a slightly larger scale, these changes and sites of seemingly very personal strife drive the policy debates that this book explores: feminism, racial justice movements, and the stagnant real wages that drove us all into the workforce; welfare and McJobs; immigration, nannies, and housecleaners; in vitro fertilization (IVF), later childbearing, and rising racial disparities in infant mortality; gay marriage; and Black and Latinx single moms, subprime mortgages, and the foreclosure crisis. It's not us. It's the economy (stupid).

In analyzing large-scale economic change from inside households, I am drawing on a long feminist political and economic tradition that has grappled with economic shifts in precisely this way. The concept itself comes from Marx, writing at the height of the long workday in the nineteenth century, who realized that the industrial revolution had taken the working class perilously close to the limits of how many hours one could work for wages (and for how little money) and still provide space for the production of "workers' replacements"—that is, the next generation required even by the capitalist class as workers were dying in their twenties of sheer overwork. From Cuba to China to European socialism, feminists have described reproductive labor as

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particularly *women's* work and built political movements that center its crucial significance to all economies.

The changes in the United States that have brought our households to a new point of crisis didn't happen overnight. They were the result of a long political campaign on the right. The central components of shrinking the state were reproductive politics and race, or better, a specifically racialized account of families and reproductive labor. In the welfare reform debate, conservatives painted families that needed public benefits as Black, Latinx, immigrant, or Native. The more successful they were in demonizing people of color and welfare, the less public support there was for anyone's household, even if it was middle-class and white. Our current time/wages/reproductive labor crisis represents the defeat of a particular version of feminist and racial justice politics, which demanded survival resources for communities and their reproduction—an end to forced sterilization, enough work or public benefits that kids and communities get enough to eat, relief from state violence or neglect that results in lower life expectancy and high rates of infant mortality—and a 40-hour workweek that enables people to get paid and still have time to do essential care work. These movements prioritized reproductive labor as real and important, insisted on the value of people of color and their reproduction, asked for affordable, high-quality child care and wages for housework, embraced many different kinds of households and kinship, and demanded support for and affirmation of gay dads and lesbian mothers, single mothers, working mothers, and those who didn't want to be any kind of parent at all.

Beginning in the late 1980s, as part of its campaign for lower taxes and a smaller (or nonexistent) social safety net, conservatives argued for "traditional" families and their "family values," (which

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meant heterosexuality, women at home, the privatization of care work and domestic violence, and church as support if families got in bad trouble economically or otherwise). This book shows how "welfare queens" became the target of this Reagan-era crusade for family values, resting on the shaming of Black, Latinx, and Native women as lazy, sexually loose, single mothers who were all "welfare cheats." This campaign went hand in hand with the related invention of the "crack mother"/"crack baby" (despite little evidence that crack has much effect on pregnancies or their outcomes[8]) to describe the kind of government conservatives saw as desirable: no benefits to families or households but a lot of policing (and incarceration—the number of women in prison rose 800 percent between 1980 and 2002).[9] This, despite the fact that the use of AFDC, cocaine, and alcohol are all more common among white mothers.[10]

As anyone who hasn't been living under a rock for the past forty years knows, parenting and other kinds of reproductive labor are intensely racialized. Some people's social reproduction—Black folks, Latin Americans and Latinxs, Native communities, immigrants—not only doesn't count as much as white social reproduction but can be shamed and denigrated. When unarmed teenagers Mike Brown and Trayvon Martin were shot—in Ferguson, Missouri, and Sanford, Florida, respectively—some (white) people actively campaigned to portray them as thugs and suggest that the shootings were justified because, well, they were criminals and their lives simply didn't matter. Anti-immigration activists have sought measures to ensure that some Latinx babies can't get birth certificates ("anchor babies"), that as children they can't go to school or get vaccinations (Prop. 187), that as young adults they can't go to college (state bans on their presence at public universities in Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina), and that as adults they can't get jobs—all by

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insisting that they are "illegal." Since the nineteenth century, when Indian boarding schools were founded to "kill the Indian to save the man" by cutting boys' hair and extinguishing kids' use of indigenous languages, the U.S. project with Native kids has been, so far as possible, to eliminate their Nations' social reproduction altogether—sponsoring adoption programs by non-Native people and vigorously pursuing reasons to put them into foster care. Since 2015, the Goldwater Institute, a conservative legal organization, has actively been working to destroy the Indian Child Welfare Act, designed to protect the rights of parents, extended family, and community for children eligible for tribal enrollment.

This book argues that racializing reproductive labor and pretending it doesn't exist or doesn't matter have worked in and through each other to produce a particularly taut and tense politics of families and households across the past forty years: it's incredibly difficult to survive without one (because you can't even get through the flu without someone to care for you, never mind go through any extended period of joblessness or disability, childhood, or aged years), but not all families count. The campaign to shame the welfare queen—begun long before Reagan but intensifying with his campaign for the presidency and subsequent election—produced both these effects: the illegitimacy of some families and the elimination of benefits to support them. "Welfare reform" was both a symptom and a cause of changes in the middle-class family: nobody could stay home with the kids anymore and there could be no expectation of public support. The anti-welfare campaign, more than any other single thing, ushered in the neoliberal moment.

The massive disinvestment in families and communities that neoliberalism represented should have generated more opposition than it did (and, of course, it may yet). As the Occupy movement

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pointed out, citing economist Joseph Stiglitz, 99 percent of us suffered as a result.[11] However, its racial politics forestalled much of that criticism. That is, the peculiar genius of US conservative politics across centuries has been to compensate white folks for their impoverishment with a belief that whites are morally superior. However down and out they may be, white families could always think themselves better than someone. As social theorists from W.E.B. DuBois to George Lipsitz have argued, this compensatory function of whiteness may have been a bad bargain in that it gave the elite classes virtually unchecked power and a free hand to loot the fruits of other people's labor, but it was not without compensations: it allowed middle and even working-class whites access to better schools, roads, and housing; freedom to use parks, pools, and other public spaces; few restrictions on voting; and relative freedom from surveillance and policing.[12] With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the United States saw the next iteration of the precipitous drop in wages, health, and family well-being across the middle and working classes begun under Reagan: an authoritarian state that only vaguely promises economic well-being but enthusiastically champions white supremacy.

This book narrates how reproductive politics have been transformed by neoliberalism and how the "culture wars" that were supposedly about God and gays (which is to say, the proper form of the family and reproductive labor) have been the backbone of a campaign to shift the relationship of government, personal responsibility, and economy. That is to say, it shows how all politics became reproductive politics, and remained so. Households are where we have most acutely felt the changes of neoliberalism, its shocks and disruptions. The first two chapters describe feminist and racial justice movements' expansive vision of ways to share care and survival work across family, communi-

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ties, and government in the middle decades of the twentieth century and the racist welfare reform campaign that crushed it.

The third chapter looks at immigration—the crackdown on immigrants in the United States and the global restructuring that forced a majority female migrant labor force to leave their children behind in home countries as they came to the United States (among a host of other places) to do, for the most part, reproductive labor for other people's families—as nannies, housekeepers, gardeners, and elder care and attendant care workers. They took over the work that had previously been done by women and families who now had everyone in the formal labor force, first in global cities like Los Angeles and New York among the wealthy, and then spiraling down to the middle class all over the country. It's a story about offshoring reproductive labor. This wasn't just a privilege of the wealthy; it was also a survival strategy of those most disadvantaged by the massive impoverishment of that era (think of the Mexican peso collapse of 1994 or the Guatemalan civil war), who were also shifting people in need of care away from those who could work for wages—dramatically so. As these macroeconomic shifts put a migratory workforce in motion, families were often shredded, with elders, children, and those with disabilities that prevented them from holding jobs (and those disabled while trying to migrate, working in unsafe jobs, or doing the militarized labor of imperial expansion, policing borders and waging wars on drugs) staying "home" while the working-age, able-bodied population moved to wherever they could sell their labor.

These raced and gendered changes also resulted in dramatic demographic shifts within the United States, including the rise of what some called neo-eugenics in the form of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs), which I turn to in the fourth chapter. People started to have kids later, as women in particular delayed

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childbearing until after a long period in higher education and getting established in a career. This in turn led to a growing prevalence of "structural infertility"—infertility resulting from women who weren't able to start trying to get pregnant until their thirties, after their peak period of fertility had passed. A new industry, selling ARTs—assisted reproduction technologies (like IVF)—stepped into the breach, promising that this was a problem you could buy your way out of, and offering new options for queer families and transgender folk, too. Unfortunately, its success rates were low—around 40 percent at best; its costs, astronomical. Only under exceptional circumstances was access to it even, as in the military, which had a great welfare system—worthy of socialism—from universal health care to high-quality child care. The privatized cost of ARTs for those outside the military, however, was particularly unfortunate since the effects of growing economic inequality were most strongly felt by people of color, whether as poverty, the grinding stress of staying in the middle class, or the conflicts of work, dependent care, and community. Black women in particular were about twice as likely as white women to experience infertility and about half as likely to use ARTs. African American women were also more than twice as likely as white women of matched economic class or age to lose a child in its first year of life, an epidemic of infant mortality increasingly documented by public health experts as an effect of racism, exacerbated by the decline in survival resources of public benefits and the labor of communities and households and the sharp growth of racial disparities in the period between Reagan-era welfare reform and the Trump administration.

For queer and trans families and households, the contradictions of this situation were intensified as their right to even be considered a family was explicitly challenged in the rhetoric of

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"family values," which I explore in chapter 5. Neoliberal privatization is the context in which gay marriage became an issue, despite the decided ambivalence of queer activists and communities. Family ties—of a particularly matrimonial sort—were not only the only way to get health insurance or pensions but also to visit your dying lover in the hospital, hang on to custody or visitation of your kids, or stay in relation to the people you love in the event of illness or serious disability. After forty years of changes in the workplace and government, the critical necessity of family to support dependency was the new normal, and the push for same-sex marriage revealed exactly how limited our concept of family and household had become.

In short, the sharply divisive issues of the last forty years—feminism and stay-at-home moms, welfare reform, family values, immigration, crack babies, IVF and surrogacy, disproportionate Black infant mortality rates, gay marriage—have all been organized along a single economic and political fault line: the ballooning importance of households and their private care labor in the face of a disappearing safety net, work lives that make no accommodation to the reproductive work of households and communities, and the shaming of those single mothers, queers, trans folk, feminists, and others not organizing their households into a "traditional" family. The final pages of the book look at the economic meltdown of 2007–2008 and the central role of someone who looks suspiciously like the reincarnation of the welfare queen with a twist: the "subprime" borrower. Disproportionately, Black, Latinx, and single mothers were aggressively targeted by banks and mortgage companies for deceptively marketed loans that often couldn't be paid once the job market and housing markets began to get soft. Or they were sometimes defrauded of their homes and money by the mortgage service industry and

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robo-signers even if they did pay. And an intensified form of Reaganomics gave rise to the Tea Party, born in a rant against the (false) idea that President Obama was going to bail out "losers' mortgages," apparently held disproportionately by illegal immigrants and African Americans. However much they may have deserved a bailout, the Obama administration in its alliances with Wall Street was never going to deliver it.

In the United States, all politics are reproductive politics. It's not just that our public conversations about feminism, race, immigration, trans and gay liberation have centered around questions of children, households, and families. Wealth and poverty issues center around how many children people can afford, drug use during pregnancy, charter schools and school discipline, foster care, and policing. While the overwhelming majority of people in poverty are women and children, our political conversation about the growing gap between rich and poor and the decline in class mobility seems to take no account of how very gendered this problem is, notwithstanding the brief prominence of a conversation about the feminization of poverty in the early 1980s.[13]

The current state of reproductive labor is marked by crisis. We don't have the time or resources to care for those who cannot work because by keeping wages depressed, business can command that everyone is supposed to work. Government has been artificially and deliberately thrown into crisis by tax cuts that lead to debt and austerity. Crises of care labor are problems that particularly affect those understood to be women, and even more so impoverished women, but they also reach men and stretch up the class ladder: we have built a society and an economic system that makes it very difficult to have dependents and an adequate income unless you are independently wealthy. And this is not, actually, good for anyone.

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