1 Introduction: Common Sense in Anxious Times

A paradoxical situation emerged in the late 1990s: the dramatic upscaling of the suburban American dream, even as the possibilities for achieving and maintaining it diminished. This book explores middle-class anxieties and suburban life during those years. It was the "dot.com boom," and the media overflowed with unbridled enthusiasm for the state of the economy, with only sparse attention paid to those who were feeling the downside of its effects, financial or otherwise. And yet, contradictory conditions of middle-class life could be seen everywhere: in suburban towns, as countless new subdivisions of ever-larger homes sprouted up while municipalities struggled to maintain their infrastructure; in people's jobs, as wages increased and stock options proliferated but job security became ever more fleeting; in aspirations for children's futures, as expectations for achievement intensified while public resources for education diminished; on credit-card statements, as credit lines expanded but were matched by new "had to have" consumer items and once-considered luxuries that had somehow become "needs"; in retirement and college funds, as balances grew dramatically on paper but were increasingly vulnerable in a volatile market. A decade later, the economy would head into a tailspin and the media would start to unpack why the middle class had come to be less

secure in the late 1990s than at any time since the Great Depression. But during the 1990s, before the extraordinary amount of public discussion about the "squeeze" on the middle class, people's anxieties about transformations under way were largely dismissed amid celebrations of the generous benefits of the booming economy.

In a time before a settled narrative emerges to explain disconcerting changes in people's lives, what becomes of the anxieties produced out of this disorientation? Where do these anxieties play out in the intimacies of everyday life and the intricacies of public debate? How do they intersect with other enduring fears, hopes, and aspirations? What effects do they have on people's subjectivities, their families, and their communities? What might children and youth be learning by coming of age during a time of major class transformation? How will their new habits of everyday life shape the political-economic future and the future (or lack thereof) of a commitment to the social good? Moreover, since ways of being classed change in different historical moments, might we be able to see the friction of old and new ways of being middle class as they rub up against each other?

To explore these questions, I conducted ethnographic research in a suburban New Jersey town in the late 1990s among families who were experiencing firsthand the uneven and shifting structural conditions undergirding middle-class life and who were living in a town that embodies late-twentieth-century changes to the postwar American dream. Danboro (a pseudonym) had been a farming community until the mid-1960s, when suburbanization began with the arrival of white-flight émigrés from the outer boroughs of New York City, particularly Brooklyn. The families who flooded the town in the late 1970s and early 1980s moved to Danboro from working-class and lower-middle-class urban neighborhoods to get their piece of the suburban American dream. They were doing so, however, just as the glory days of middle-class security were coming to a close and "keeping up with the Joneses" was transforming into "keeping up with the Dow Jones."[1] The changing architectural and infrastructural landscape of the town over the years since they first moved in provided a powerful iconic expression of the shift. The houses built in the subdivisions of the 1960s and 1970s were moderately sized (by American standards) colonial-style homes, the size and style of which signified the suburban American dream in the early post-Fordist period.

During the late 1980s, a few developments of larger colonial-style homes were built. But in the late 1990s, the architectural landscape of the town began to change profoundly. Huge homes, which some disdainfully refer to as "McMansions," were built adjacent to older subdivisions. These new houses dwarfed their neighbors and produced jarring juxtapositions. When compounded with increasing concerns about overcrowding and limited public resources—whether in regard to never-ending traffic, overflowing public schools, or diminishing open space—these architectural shifts provoked anxieties and aroused uncertainties about fiscal and discursive boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in the imagined future of the town and of the middle class itself. Like gentrification in urban areas, changes in the grandeur of suburban housing reflect a transformation of the class makeup of a town and reveal shifts in the larger class structure and the structuring of people's social locations.

To understand the manifestation of class anxieties in the intimate spaces and quotidian moments of family life and the ways they shape public discourse and municipal governance, I moved to the Danboro area in the fall of 1997. Drawing on the tools of ethnography, my research mined the habits, practices, and sentiments of everyday life for insights into the cultural politics of class in the late 1990s. Over the course of two years, I conducted participant observation and interviews in sites of public and private life, including people's homes, their town hall, and even their sport-utility vehicles. I spent time with several families and worked as an "ethnographic babysitter" to have particularly focused time in the everyday life of one family. The ethnographic sites, spaces, and situations in which I spent my days and nights included family dinners and gatherings, shopping trips to the mall and the local strip malls, workouts at the gym where stay-at-home moms gathered after kids went to school, drives around town and through neighboring areas, TV-watching parties and Nintendo-playing hangouts, after-school activities, pre-prom parties, and a host of other ordinary aspects of suburban life.[2] I also spent many evenings at public meetings in the town and the school district of which Danboro High School is a part, including those of the zoning board of adjustment, town council, planning board, and board of education.[3]

During my research I found that even as middle-class stability continued to be undermined by neoliberal policies, people's sense of entitlement

to the privileges and accoutrements of the middle classes was nevertheless amplified. Anxieties emerging from these conditions played out in a nervous and somewhat aggressive struggle for the appearance and feeling of class security, rather than coalitional efforts to address structural conditions threatening middle-class life. Each chapter of the book depicts how people were trying to create for themselves "a little security in an insecure world," to borrow a tag line from a Chevy Blazer advertisement during the late 1990s. Hence I use the phrase *rugged entitlement* to capture this structure of feeling, which I witnessed in the town. The central argument of the book is that rugged entitlement—a product of neoliberalism and its limited commitment to the public good—participated in furthering conditions that intensified middle-class anxieties in the first place. This ironic state of affairs—whereby habits, practices, and purchases that temporarily appease class insecurities end up making people feel and be less secure— is what the book vividly illustrates.

Each chapter draws attention to a variety of vehicles that paved the way for the development of the sensibility of rugged entitlement. As families struggled to reorient themselves to the changing material conditions undergirding middle-class life, the ways that they were doing so produced the kinds of class-encoded habits, desires, and practices that entrench neoliberal logics: hyperconsumption and overspending that benefit corporate capital; spatial strategies that further segregation along race, class, and age lines; and privatized solutions that divert a politics of demand on the state. The economics and cultural politics of rugged entitlement, however, ended up steering many Danboro children, youth, and parents into ambivalence about the structuring and texture of their everyday lives: it is exhausting work to be strategically and persistently driving after class. But more often than not, unable to imagine the possibility of crafting another way of life, most curbed these unsettling doubts and resolutely fueled up for the ride.

A ROBUST U.S. MIDDLE CLASS: NO LONGER NEEDED AND NECESSARY?

Being middle class is inherently unsettling. As Barbara Ehrenreich has noted, "Whether the middle class looks down towards the realm of the

less, or up towards the realm of more, there is the fear, always, of falling."[4] Yet in different historical moments, middle-class security can vary significantly, depending not only on the global economy and the United States' dominance within it, but also on how the state uses its power to manage and regulate capital accumulation among the bourgeoisie, or capitalist class. To put it crudely, the late 1990s was a time when the U.S. bourgeoisie no longer needed the U.S. middle class to the same extent that it had before, not unlike its decreased dependence on the U.S. working class. To better appreciate the circumstances of those years, I offer here a brief (and thus necessarily simplified) historical sketch of key moments in the development and decline of the U.S. middle class. It is a story not only of the rise and fall of the bourgeoisie's need for U.S. middle-class workers, consumers, and citizens, but also of a state that has, more often than not, aligned with bourgeois interests.

There has been a middle class in the United States since the late colonial period, whose members ranged from small producers, artisans, farmers, and shopkeepers to doctors, lawyers, clergy, and teachers to small-scale wholesalers, importers, managers, and salesmen. These "middling sorts"[5] were doing significant work for the capitalist system, but their numbers were relatively small, as was their political strength. It was not until the Progressive Era that the fortification of the middle class took place through the growth of the professional managerial sector.[6] The great expansion of production under late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century monopoly capital required not only more workers for factories, more consumers for goods, and new forms of expertise in industrial engineering, but also experts to manage (and create) the "new" American worker, consumer, and citizen. The expanding workforce was heavily composed of new immigrants in a time of growing labor unrest and escalating anxieties about the possibility of socialist revolution. The role of the "middlemen" (i.e., those who not only made production more efficient but could produce hegemonic formations to contain unrest, such as Henry Ford's educators who "Americanized" his workers) became crucial, and so a portion of surplus capital went to fund the growth not only of the sciences, but also of the social sciences and social-engineering reform projects. The crucial need for these forms of expertise enabled the middle class to benefit and to grow. Yet they toiled on terms set by the bourgeoisie, and since they

did not own the means of production, they were not *of* capital, and many "possessed a class outlook which was distinct from, *and often antagonistic to,* that of the capitalist class."[7] At the same time, the nature of the work of the middle class—particularly those who were psychologists, social workers, and other "helping" professionals and reform experts—placed them in an often directly antagonistic and paternalistic relationship with the working class. This small but growing middle-class workforce thus emerged in an unstable and uncomfortable position of being in-between.[8] Anxieties about securing a place for themselves fueled the expansion of this type of work, over time providing more solid ground for the class itself.

The post–World War II period was the next key moment in which the middle class proved essential for resolving the conflicts and contradictions of capital accumulation.[9] The Great Depression had tempered economic growth (and the growth of the middle class), but its unmatched severity gave rise to new forms of regulation and state-sponsored entitlements. The New Deal, combined with the wartime economy and the donation of federally funded wartime inventions and manufacturing processes to private companies, set the stage for the postwar period to be extremely lucrative for the U.S. bourgeoisie. Yet the postwar period also was an extremely anxious time. As veterans returned from war, a housing and employment crisis ensued, and ideological contention over the threat of communism escalated. It was a do-or-die moment for the future of American capitalism. The solution was a form of redistribution known as Keynesianism, enacted most notably through government funding, backing, and infrastructural support of expanded educational and small-business opportunities and mass home ownership in the form of suburban housing.[10] Financed and administered through a variety of bills (e.g., G.I. Bill, Federal Highway Act, National Defense Education Act) and agencies (e.g., Veterans Administration, Federal Housing Administration, Home Owners' Loan Corporation), these efforts sparked spectacular job growth in related industries, including "white collar" work to manage the production and circulation of commodities created through new manufacturing capabilities, ranging from cars to real estate to home goods. In turn, a vast new consumer demand for those goods was created out of the new "needs" of those workers, as they became home owners and car drivers. Yet there was a segregationist logic written into the building of the suburbs in the

postwar period through the federal government's recommendation that federally backed housing loans not be granted for neighborhoods or towns with people of color. As declared in the Federal Housing Administration's *Underwriting Manual,* "If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes."[11] So while the wealth created in the immediate postwar period was brought within reach of a newly flourishing middle class, enabled the class to grow, created new routes of class mobility through giving more Americans a piece of the pie, and tempered another moment of potential political-economic unrest, it also ripened the conditions for the civil rights and feminist movements to follow.

Equally as significant as the material achievements of Keynesianism was the ideological entrenchment of equating being in the middle class with success and with being American.[12] By the 1950s, a good portion of white (and soon-to-be white) Americans had begun to view themselves as members of the middle class. They earned decent wages, owned homes with yards, bought the latest consumer goods, drove around in cars, sent their kids off to college, and saw their lives reflected in the mass culture of the time. Middle-class suburban life came to represent what it meant to be an American. This new version of the American dream took hold, no longer a rags-to-riches story but rather class mobility that hinged on the accoutrements of the postwar middle-class ideal. It was an ideological realization of the Keynesian dream of a "revolutionary American capitalism"[13] that would get rid of economic inequality through eliminating the working class and replacing capitalists with middle-class managers. Even though that material reality was not realized, and the policies and cultural politics undergirding suburban growth directly undermined cities and attempts by people of color to acquire asset wealth through home ownership,[14] the myth that "everyone is middle class" was one its lasting legacies, as those who "made it" started to feel secure in their class positioning.

This moment of security was, however, relatively short-lived. With the onset of broad-scale, global political-economic restructuring in the 1960s, the growth and stability of the post–World War II period proved unsustainable.[15] The global dominance of the United States began to diminish as Germany, Japan, and Italy entered as key competitors in the capitalist market and as protests arose from those being exploited within the United

States and around the world. With the financial and energy crisis of 1973–1974, the capitalist system as a whole was affected.[16] Over the decades to follow, new economic theories and policies emerged to co-opt the economic situation in favor of the U.S. bourgeoisie—what now is often referred to as neoliberalism.[17] Through shifting transnational coalitional efforts, or what Gramsci refers to as "ruling blocs,"[18] the global market was expanded through new forms of speculation and privatization of various state-controlled industries and segments of the public sphere. Labor costs were reduced through offshoring and outsourcing, the increased use of subcontracting and other forms of flexible labor, and the augmented exploitation of migrant, minority, and female labor in the growing service sector. Consumption was amped up through an expanded ethos of consumerism and fine-tuned gradations of distinction matched by new means of acquiring expanded credit. These techniques of optimization were supported by new approaches to government, including applying business models to governance and reducing entitlements and safety nets for individual households while increasing support (military, security, or otherwise) for non-redistributive corporate economic growth. In short, it was a move away from the postwar liberal ideal of economic growth and government spending for the public good and the good of American capitalism and toward the neoliberal ideal of lean government that proved to be for the good of a small elite, with the rest largely left to fend for themselves.

While these efforts enabled renewed accumulation of capital among the bourgeoisie, their "faithful middlemen" did not fare quite as well, nor did the possibility for mobility into the middle class. These conditions—part of the backstory of the economic crisis to follow—placed the burdens of everyday life increasingly on the backs of individual families and local communities, amplifying the class, race, and gender inequalities produced in the postwar period. The wealth created during the economic booms of the 1980s and 1990s was acquired and distributed unequally. Some members of the middle class experienced downward mobility whereas others became more affluent. Towns like Danboro witnessed a considerable expansion of the gap separating the middle and upper middle classes (i.e., those who could afford only the moderately sized homes versus those who could afford any home in the town). In the 2000 U.S. Census, 12 percent of town residents earned more than twice the median household income

in the town, with 14 percent earning over 50 percent more than the median.[19] As Sherry Ortner pointed out at the time, "The top and the bottom of the middle class began pulling away from one another . . . the upper middle class has done better and better, while the lower middle class has been slipping down into more and more difficult straits."[20]

During the 1980s, Barbara Ehrenreich wrote about sentiments that emerged among the professional middle class in the decades since its dramatic growth and affluence in the postwar period—an anxious mix of self-interest and self-loathing fueled by a "fear of falling."[21] Anthropologist Katherine Newman honed in on the immediate aftermath of the economic downturn of the 1980s, revealing how downwardly mobile members of the managerial middle class maintained their faith in meritocratic individualism, even as changing economic conditions threatened their ability to remain in their jobs, their homes, and their hometowns. Rather than feel frustration at "the system," they blamed themselves.[22] In a subsequent study in the early 1990s set in a northern New Jersey town, Newman found intense resentment among the younger members of the (white) baby boom generation, many of whom could not afford the comfortable middle-class lifestyle in which they had grown up.[23] Their frustration and anger were often directed at "illegitimate elites" (wealthy families of Asian descent) and the "parasitic underclass" (recipients of welfare), rather than at the government for no longer offering the same scale of public entitlements that enabled their parents to attain a secure middle-class positioning. Newman underscores, importantly—as I do throughout this book—that the inability to attain that which some people had always taken for granted is a product of large-scale political-economic shifts. Regardless of how people made sense of their situation, they were experiencing something that was not a "momentary glitch."[24]

This book picks up where Newman's story leaves off and joins other ethnographic efforts that explore what occurred during the late 1990s as the "widening abyss"[25] in the shrinking middle class continued to grow, though from the perspective of the less often discussed "other" boomers who did not grow up in middle-class suburbs. (The parents in Danboro whom you will meet in this book largely grew up in working-class and lower-middle-class urban neighborhoods in a city that was spiraling downward *because* of policies benefiting the suburbs. It was in part

through entering into careers such as teaching, accounting, sales, law, medicine, and administration that they made their way into middle-class suburban life.) Like those in Newman's field sites, the anxious middle class in Danboro maintained frustration at themselves and at racialized and class-encoded others. But I also observed a powerful presence of anxiety and concern about people who were often ethnically similar to most long-time residents, but who were (presumed to be) higher in the hierarchy of the middle classes.

What was happening in Danboro appears to parallel some of what we see in the growing anthropological literature on the middle classes around the world, where tensions between the "old middle class" and "new middle class" are quite prevalent in many locations including India, China, Egypt, and Hungary.[26] Even though each site has dramatically different class histories, what runs through them all is that "old" and "new" refer not just to what type of work people do (e.g., civil servants versus entrepreneurs), but to people's sensibilities in regard to the state, the proper relationship between public and private, and strategies for seeking security. Class relations are produced within particular historical moments with their associated economic, cultural, political, and moral logics.[27] In the United States in the late 1990s, these tensions were a product of the shift from postwar liberal to post-1970s neoliberal political economies, class formations, and subjects.

THE RESIDUAL AND THE DOMINANT: THE POSTWAR LIBERAL SUBURB IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

To capture the nuances of class change, we need to think *through* particular localities, for, as geographer Doreen Massey notes, "the articulation of social relations necessarily [has] a spatial form in their interactions with one another."[28] Yet as we think historically and spatially about capitalism's instantiation in novel forms, it is crucial to avoid the tendency to view a time period through the lens of its characterization, such as "the neoliberal moment." When we do, we fail to appreciate the historical variability of any moment in time and run the risk of focusing predominantly on what is "new," failing to keep in view sites and strategies that appear to

come from—or only be relevant in regard to—a previous historical moment.[29] As Raymond Williams has noted, "The complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions—traditions, institutions, and formations—but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of *historically* varied and variable elements."[30]

Danboro is a particularly compelling site for exploring the "dynamic interrelations" of "historically varied and variable elements" in the United States in the late 1990s. It is a town that people moved to out of faith in the liberal promise of postwar suburbia: home ownership in a town with public schools, municipal recreation facilities, citizen-run school boards, open lawns, and no gates. Yet like most places in the neoliberal era, Danboro has seen significant changes, including increased focus on luxury markets and the interests of corporate capital, blurring of lines between public and private services and governance, and growing precarity of the professional managerial jobs held by many Danboro residents.[31] As such, it is a fruitful site for thinking about "frictions"[32] within the middle class, as residual postwar ideals confront newly dominant sensibilities associated with neoliberalism, with the "residual" (the subject of chapter 2) understood as that which "has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process . . . as an effective element of the present."[33]

As you drive through Danboro, some of the residual postwar elements are hard to miss. One afternoon early into my fieldwork, I toured a friend of mine—a historian from Indonesia—around town. We drove past streets of moderately sized colonial-style homes with two-car garages and fresh-cut lawns. We wound our way through housing developments differentiated from each other by coordinated street names. (Beech Drive and Cedar Way are in the "tree-names section" of the Danboro Heights subdivision; Plato Road and Homer Drive intersect in the "ancient-Greeks section" of Oak Views.) We stopped by the Danboro Municipal Complex, which includes Danboro's town hall, the Danboro Free Library, the Danboro Recreation Center, the Danboro Public Schools administrative offices, the Danboro Middle School, a vast array of well-kept soccer fields, and a host of other municipal buildings and recreation facilities. As we rode, we glimpsed (mostly white[34]) kids playing games in cul-de-sacs; strip malls that function as surrogate town centers; randomly distributed

elementary schools, churches, and synagogues; and a few remaining farms and country roads reminiscent of Danboro's past as a farming community. The entire time, we drove along open roads with signs that welcome rather than with gates that exclude. At one point my friend looked over at me and exclaimed, "Whoever declared the end of suburbia has never been to Danboro!"

At first glance, Danboro does bear a striking resemblance to iconic postwar-style suburbia.[35] Its suburban development, after all, began at the tail end of the postwar period. But Danboro is also located on what was the border of the "crabgrass frontier"[36] in the late 1990s in central New Jersey, one of the fastest-growing regions in the state. If we move through Danboro with a critical geography lens tuned to signs of political-economic shifts, we can see that much has changed since the 1970s. The transformations were most vividly evident in Danboro's physical appearances. Original Levitt-built subdivisions were being dwarfed by newly built developments that some have called "luxurious Levittowns."[37] Houses in perfectly good condition were being knocked down to make room for larger, more upscale homes that awkwardly protruded in size among the originals. It seemed as if everywhere you looked, there were bulldozers clearing land that used to be farms, with signs around town directing potential buyers to the new "luxury" subdivisions under construction.

Less obvious, at least from a drive around town, were the effects of this unfettered optimization of land, particularly by development corporations allowed to maximize their profits at the expense of the municipal tax base and the wallets of local citizens. With each new subdivision of houses built, new families moved into town, adding children to school facilities that were already overcrowded and driving cars on main roads that were buckling under the weight of overdevelopment. Temporary trailers had to be added to some of the elementary schools to house overflow students, and a heated and racially charged redistricting battle was under way to address overcrowding in the high school district of which Danboro High School was a part (the subject of chapter 6). Route 2, the multilane highway that runs through Danboro and is the primary route to New York City and to most of the local malls and strip malls, was so crowded during rush hours and on weekends that everyone had their own alternative routes to avoid the frustrating traffic. With no pressure on development corpora-

tions from local or state government to provide funds to municipal coffers to address the increased infrastructural demands, the tab was picked up largely through higher property taxes, a common occurrence in New Jersey with its long history of home rule. While some after-the-fact state help addressed school needs, it did not come through requiring corporations to pay their fair share, but rather through direct funds from an already overburdened state. This, too, was the approach to alleviating congestion, although towns and regions were forced to compete for limited state funds in a dynamic that Neil Brenner calls "competitive regionalism."[38] Christine Todd Whitman, then the governor of New Jersey, supported various "open space" initiatives to curb sprawl through retaining some of New Jersey's undeveloped land. The county in which Danboro is located was fortunate to have received a "Smart Growth Planning Grant" in early 2000 to address the congestion problems along the Route 2 corridor—one of only twenty-one grants awarded throughout the state.

While the state was picking up the tab for corporate capital instead of reining it in, there also was a notable turn toward running the state "like a business,"[39] including subcontracting and privatizing some of its core functions. This blending of public governance and private enterprise manifested itself in practices such as hiring a consulting firm to manage the arduous high school redistricting process, and, on a far grander scale, closing a state psychiatric hospital located on the edge of town. In the late 1990s, the hospital was shut down along with other state-run facilities throughout New Jersey. Some patients were moved to other state hospitals, though most were sent to mental-health group homes run by nonprofit organizations (with nonunion labor) or to live on their own with a stipend and assistance in the hopes that they would learn to "self-govern"[40] their illnesses. At the same time, a nonprofit organization tried to open one of these group homes in a nearby housing development. The homeowners in the subdivision in which it was to be located fought to keep it from being built. Town officials, meanwhile, floated the idea of attracting a Fortune 500 company to the hospital land. Corporate campuses are a boon for municipal coffers; unlike housing developments, they bring in tax dollars without adding kids to the school budget.

Locally owned establishments also experienced a change of hands, in some cases via large corporations caught up in boom-time "proclamations

of shareholder value."[41] Body Fitness was the most popular gym in Danboro when I began my research. It was located in a huge building with an enormous parking lot on Route 2. You couldn't miss it as you drove past. It was one of four Body Fitness gyms in the area. During my field-work, an international corporation with over a hundred gyms along the eastern seaboard and in Europe bought it out as part of a broader effort to break into the New Jersey market in advance of an IPO.[42] Like other developments hailed for their "flexibility" in the new economy, the buyout of Body Fitness did enable residents who commuted to New York City to have the option of working out at home or in the city near their office and provided the gym's employees with greater possibility for advancement. But these benefits came at an expense—literally, for those who decided to join the gym after the sale, and bureaucratically in terms of the increased hassles when the owner was no longer the guy playing basketball on Saturday mornings on the court in the back of the gym.

Gyms like Body Fitness also were part of the increasing meeting point of the privatization of public life and the growth of the service sector. This convergence made its appearance most vividly on refrigerators in homes of families with elementary school–age children, where party invitations were displayed. The "playgrounds" or "neighborhood parks" in which birthday parties were often held were located in privately owned commer-cial, full-service entertainment establishments for kids. For their teenage counterparts, where concerns about enhancing public school education loomed large, particularly as the time for college applications approached, there was a notable uptick in private tutoring and test-preparation classes.

Neoliberalism's refiguring of space and place has been on the agenda of scholars for some time now.[43] Most ethnographic research on sites of the middle class in the United States until the 2007 housing crash focused on what was new or had been exacerbated. Those studying the urban core generated a wealth of excellent work on gentrification and public–private partnerships.[44] Scholars writing about the suburbs focused largely either on communities that were architecturally new, such as New Urbanism developments, or on those that became pervasive, like gated communi-ties.[45] Towns like Danboro were relatively absent from ethnographic stud-ies exploring the cultural logics of political-economic changes in the United States.[46] This is likely because they appear at first glance to embody resid-

ual postwar middle-class ideals: open lawns, public schools, municipal recreation facilities, and town-hall politics. Yet turning our attention to communities like Danboro offers a fruitful context in which to understand how "the familiar" came to matter differently under neoliberal conditions.

As my research in this town reveals, there is distinct resonance between what I explore and what scholars of gated communities refer to as the mounting penchant for "forting up."[47] Danboro may not have gated communities, which are viewed as architectural evidence of the growing "fortress mentality"[48] in the United States. In fact, an explosive zoning board debate erupted (the subject of chapter 3) when a couple requested permission to build for their new home a six-foot-high ornamental security gate, which would have been the first of its kind in the town. But as each chapter of this book brings to life, non-architectural mechanisms of "gating" were also at work. They are extraordinarily powerful and operate in subtle ways, through the everyday production of habits, desires, and sentiments; the racialized, gendered, and class-encoded organization of space; and the discursive and linguistic policing of borders and boundaries by means of humor, rumor, heckling, and coded language. Although perhaps not as glaring as gates of steel, these strategies of exclusion and inclusion—whether through wearing high-end sports gear that neighboring towns cannot afford (as we see in chapter 4) or driving around town in sport-utility vehicles that place other drivers at increased risk (as we see in chapter 5) or pushing back against the idea of a regional district in which all children, regardless of class or race, might have to be rezoned (as we see in chapter 6)—vigorously structure the spatial relations and social milieu of a community.

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMON SENSE IN TIMES OF CHANGE

To think through the ways that class anxieties play out in everyday life, how they shape people, practices, and spaces, and what new subjectivities and spaces emerge as the dominant rubs up against the residual, we need particular analytical frameworks to direct our ethnographic approaches and modes of analysis. My ways of seeing, hearing, and analyzing the

middle classes in the late 1990s have been heavily influenced by theories that appreciate the dynamic workings of capitalism and class—particularly the interplay of political-economic changes and the intimacies of everyday life. Capitalist systems are always in flux. Apparent stabilities are only temporary, for there are always unresolved contradictions in the means and relations of production. When moments of crisis emerge, new regimes of accumulation are developed (i.e., new economic approaches to amassing capital); new modes of regulation come into effect (i.e., new forms of governance and politics); and new subjectivities come into being (i.e., new habits, desires, and sentiments). These practices, policies, and ways of being are (or have the potential to be) regulative—that is, adaptive to and productive of the economic, political, and social order.[49]

This emphasis on the dynamic and unstable nature of capitalist systems, which are constantly shifting and producing new tensions in everyday life, points us to look ethnographically at the ways that people are continually trying to reorient themselves amid novel conditions. They are faced with a host of contexts and conditions, including the spaces in which they live and through which they move, their position as consumers and citizens, and their location in relations of production, circulation, and reproduction (i.e., their job, be it out of the home or in the home, including childrearing). Out of these circumstances, which are infused with a range of (often contradictory) ideological discourses and disciplinary practices, emerge their subjectivities.[50] It is the way that these subjectivities are classed and how they matter (in turn, shaping practices, spaces, and others) that is the focus of this book. These ways of being and becoming are not just reflections of a particular political-economic moment; they are also an intimate part of continually shaping that moment and the moments to come.[51]

Neoliberalism was becoming the new common sense in the late 1990s. I use "common sense" here as Gramsci does, not to be confused with "good sense," but rather the uncritical, unconscious way of perceiving that is deeply ingrained and is part of how we act and feel without thinking. It is something that we experience as an "instinct" but that is in fact an "elementary historical acquisition."[52] It is the fusion of class ideologies with long-standing philosophies, religious beliefs, and other moral logics and ethical practices. Moments in time have a dominant common sense, as neoliberalism was becoming in the late 1990s, but Gramsci underscored

that it is never a clear or unified common sense; it is messy, fragmented, contradictory—always intermingling with the residual, both in society and in people's "heads," with people typically having a contradictory consciousness. In other words, we often act differently from what we believe, believe differently than we act, and can suggest one belief implicitly through our behaviors yet articulate our ideology in a very different way.[53]

Common sense emerges out of what Bourdieu calls "habitus," by which he meant the dispositions that we acquire as we grow up within certain material and social conditions. It is what feels "natural" to us, what we often benignly consider to be a "life-style," but which is produced out of "the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition."[54] It is the meeting point of "macro" structures and "micro" qualities of everyday life; it is where material conditions and their associated ideologies and normative discourses become our selves in the most intimate and public ways: the things we desire, the words we use, who we want to hang out with, how we feel as we move through space, what makes us anxious. Habitus are, in Bourdieu's (admittedly elaborate) words, "systems of durable, transposable *dispositions,* structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' . . . without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor."[55] They *happen* through what Peirce refers to as the "continuity of reactions"[56] in our everyday lives. This is not to say that there are no "conductors" that shape our habitus. In towns like Danboro, those who promoted Keynesianism, designed and redesigned suburban spaces, lobbied for automobility, wrote mortgage lending rules that led to highly segregated living, came up with neoliberal theories, and developed other technologies that shape people's lives continue to be influential. Yet this history is largely "forgotten" as its effects become mundane, part of our affective, embodied, and epistemological habits, no longer obviously shaping who we are. As Bourdieu remarks, the dialectic between conditions and our habitus "transforms the distribution of capital, the balance-sheet of a power relation, into a system of perceived differences . . . whose objective truth is misrecognized."[57]

Despite being "misrecognized," this "balance-sheet" is very much "on view" in our habitus, making habitus useful objects of analysis for

thinking about class. There are many aspects to classed subjectivities, but my focus in this book is the subtle, nonconscious habits of body and mind rather than identities or people's conscious sense of class. I never asked people directly about class. Rather, I conducted an ethnography of how class is lived, how classed subjects and spaces are made, and how class is expressed and talked about indirectly, often asking the Foucauldian question, "What was being said in what was said?"[58] This includes not only what was verbalized, but also what was revealed in people's "ordinary affects,"[59] the "unconscious patterning"[60] in their everyday lives, and the "sentimental education"[61] in their midst. As Janet Finn points out, terms such as *capitalism* and *class* may not be used in the daily lives of those with whom we spend time during our fieldwork, which was very much the case in Danboro before the 2008 crash. However, our role as ethnographers is to "think about how their stories might encode language and practices of class . . . that [mean] something to social actors as well as to cultural scholars."[62]

The "structuring structures" that compose habitus not only enable us to locate class in the intimacies of everyday life; they also provide a temporal window onto changes in class structures, class formations, and people's class positionings.[63] The ethnographic moments unpacked in this book thus reveal the tense presence of old and new, whether in regard to infrastructures, habits of affect, governmental practices, parenting desires, or space making. We see not only what is generated as the dominant rubs up against the residual, but also how the familiar comes to matter differently in a new political-economic moment with new stakes. As my analysis demonstrates, the seemingly well-known—efforts to keep new carpeting clean, concerns about hiring the right kind of babysitter, the desire to feel safe behind the wheel—have an amplified intensity and a rearticulated quality that facilitate new *effects*. There is an ever-shifting dialectic: changing historical conditions produce anxieties that shape sentiments and practices that shape spaces and policies that in turn shape other people's subjectivities that in turn shape other spaces, sentiments, practices, and policies, and so on.

Thinking about class dynamically and historically, while doing an ethnography of a contemporary moment, requires that we always be thinking about what *work* habits, desires, and sentiments might be doing, not just

locally and directly, but also in regard to influencing the capitalist system. In the back of my mind was always a speculative curiosity: which aspects of people's everyday lives would prove to have lasting effects on the political economy—whether as entrenchers of the dominant common sense or as "agentive moments"[64] that shift its direction—and which were just fleeting products of a historical moment? This is, of course, a tricky task. As Alain Lipietz remarks, "It is a human practice that makes history, but not all practices are transforming."[65] I thus offer this book as an ethnographic story that "seeks to grasp the hegemonic in its active and formative but also its transformational processes."[66]

RUGGED ENTITLEMENT: A NEOLIBERAL COMMON SENSE

C. Wright Mills's classic 1951 book, *White Collar*, described the new middle-class worker in the postwar period. Mills's concern as a sociologist and public intellectual was the increasing bureaucratization of work at corporations, universities, and sites of other professions in the United States, particularly the undermining of dissent, critique, and other forms of citizenship required for genuine democracy. Mills argued that to imagine a different future we needed to understand not only the political economy of a time, but also its psychology. Just as Mills examined the dominant sensibility of his time (notably remarking that white-collar life was becoming "more typically 'American' than the frontier character probably ever was"[67]), this book focuses on the dominant common sense that emerged among the middle classes in the late 1990s. What I am calling "rugged entitlement" is an ironic descendant of that myth of rugged individualism—a contradictory offspring of decreasing state entitlements and an amplified sense of entitlement to the privileges and accoutrements of the middle class. It emerged among those who were invested in (and felt entitled to) the postwar version of middle-class suburban life, and who struggled to make that dream a reality for themselves and their children as it was becoming increasing fragile—with an anxious sense that they must vigilantly pursue their own interests to maintain and further their class position.

Rugged entitlement may best be described as a "structure of feeling." Raymond Williams describes a structure of feeling as "a particular quality

of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or period."[68] This "change of presence," Williams explains, does not have to have a "definition, classification, or rationalization before [it] exert[s] palpable pressures and set[s] effective limits on experience and action."[69] As Williams points out, new structures of feeling not only emerge with the rise of a new class; they also result from "contradiction, fracture, or mutation *within* a class."[70] The growing chasm within the shrinking middle class, combined with emerging neoliberal sensibilities and a sense of entitlement to an upscaled postwar American dream, is what created the conditions of possibility for the emergence of rugged entitlement in towns like Danboro. At the time it was, as Williams would describe it, "a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but [exists] . . . in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined."[71]

Rugged entitlement captures some aspects of what it means to be a "neoliberal subject"—shorthand for the type of person produced during this political-economic formation. There is not *one* neoliberal subject; there are particularly located neoliberal subjects. In the United States, new subjectivities reveal a contemporary working out of the long-standing tension between the founding ideals of liberalism (a government that protects life, liberty, and property, with property and the market considered the ideal sites for cultivating human potential) and republicanism (a polity of independent citizens, considered equal regardless of their rank, with the polity itself as the ideal site for cultivation).[72] This ever-present tension lies at the heart of the constant contention over the role of the state in liberal democracies.[73] In the United States the protean nature of liberal democracy is evidenced in its history, with different time periods revealing different takes on whether the individual citizen (or groups of citizens) is the main concern of the state, or whether it is property owners or the owners of capital. As Jeffrey Lustig has remarked, since the dawn of the modern corporation, the scales have tipped in favor of "corporate liberalism."[74]

My choice of phrase—*rugged entitlement*—is a play on the myth of rugged individualism. As historian Stephanie Coontz points out, the figure of the "rugged individualist" (and its close counterpart, the "self-sufficient family") are fundamental American ideals of self-reliance and enterprise, despite

the fact that "depending on support beyond the family has been the *rule* rather than the *exception* in American history."[75] The early American West is a case in point: frontier individuals and families undoubtedly worked very hard, but they would not have existed and survived had the government not relocated and killed scores of Native Americans, passed on cultivated Indian land to colonial settlers far below cost, and provided robust military protection and public subsidies, among other things. Individuals, families, and local businesses were able to stay afloat only because of a combination of federal support and local mutual-aid societies, churches, associations, and other close-knit communities of "obligation, debt, and dependence"[76] There was no such thing as a rugged "individual." In fact, as Coontz emphasizes, anti-government sentiments in the Old West emerged not in reaction to government intervention but rather out of disgruntlement when the government did *not* provide certain funds or aid; in the realm of land, for example, the government provided far more support to railroad and logging companies than it did to settlers and small enterprise.

The phrase (and myth of) rugged individualism, however, was not created during the frontier days but rather during the boom years of the 1920s, when the professional-managerial class was fortifying itself. During those years, great trepidation about socialist revolutions sweeping across Europe led not only to the need for professional-managerial workers to hegemonically create "class harmony," but also to a renewed celebration of the so-called American spirit. In tacit opposition to the socialist model, this dominant ideology was articulated most notably in Herbert Hoover's 1922 address titled "American Individualism," in which he stated his faith in a "social Force" that is "far higher" and "springs from something infinitely more enduring; it springs from the *one* source of human progress— that each individual shall be given the chance and stimulation for development of the best with which he has been endowed in heart and mind; it is the sole source of progress; it is American individualism."[77] The phrase for this ideological claim transformed over the years from *American individualism* into *rugged individualism,* ultimately invoking the mythic history of the rugged pioneer in its celebration of individual effort and initiative.

Yet, as historian Charles Beard passionately argued in his 1931 polemic, *The Myth of Rugged American Individualism,* the federal government's efforts in the early years of the Great Depression, as in all decades past,

were largely in service of stimulating big business and helping the bour-geoisie. It was not the socialists, he facetiously clarified, who pushed the U.S. government into the business of railways, waterways, roadways, farming, aviation, commerce, and various forms of trade; rather, it was bankers and businessmen, both small and large, including farmers. As Beard pointed out, the same businessmen who incessantly lobbied gov-ernment for their own ends were also the biggest proponents of the idea of rugged individualism. "From day to day," Beard remarked, "it becomes increasingly evident that some of our economic leaders (by no means all of them) are using the phrase as an excuse for avoiding responsibility. . . . If a smoke screen big enough can be laid on the land, our commercial pres-tidigitators may work wonders—for themselves."[78]

The "smoke screen" of rugged individualism masks not only the reality exposed starkly in the Depression: that capitalism works best with state sup-port and regulation, and that the government had long been undergirding corporate growth. But as the history of middle-class growth in the United States demonstrates, the state's role in capitalist regulation also involves supporting particular groups of individuals. Decades after the growth of the middle class in the postwar period, the smoke screen had come to include the myth of the "self-sufficient" white suburban family who pulled them-selves out of the working class and into their new homes through sheer hard work. Yet like the frontier family, that hard work was matched by an equal amount of hard work on the part of the state, and on the part of industries receiving heavy support from the state. Despite massive middle-class enti-tlements, benefits, and tax breaks, a discourse emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s on the "welfare queen," suggesting that it was only the racialized poor who received state support, "ignoring the historical dependence of pioneer and suburban families on public support."[79] As Katherine Newman remarked in her ethnography of a New Jersey suburb in the 1980s, "What was an achievement to be proud of for [their parents'] generation became an expectation, a norm, an entitlement in [the baby boom] generation."[80] This was the case not just for those who grew up in the suburbs, but also for those, like many in Danboro, who longed for that dream ideal. My term thus calls the "American spirit" what it really is: rugged entitlement.

"Rugged entitlement" in the late 1990s was a response to growing trepi-dation and conflict within the middle class, as the liberal-democracy pen-

dulum swung back more toward corporate welfare by the state. Those on the downwardly mobile side were angst-ridden about the growing insecurity of a class position that they had spent their lives trying to achieve or maintain. The lucky ones experiencing the benefits of the booming-economy moment often felt a sense of vertigo as they continued to amass wealth. The stock prices in their portfolios were moving upward, just like the height of their new sport-utility vehicles. But the farther one is from the ground, the more anxious and dizzying the view from above. Add to this people's collapsing confidence in public services and safety nets ranging from public education to Social Security. And sprinkle in the fact that those who transformed Danboro into a suburban community twenty years after the postwar boom, unlike an earlier generation of suburban pioneers, bought their piece of the American dream with less help from government-sponsored housing programs, and were confronting a changing landscape in their town that reflected the chasm in the middle class. You have the perfect ingredients for a new kind of wary entitlement.

Small wonder that many people in Danboro, as you will see, indulged in a bit of pastoral nostalgia (often for farms that were being transformed into housing developments) and were increasingly adopting a kind of "rugged" persona, including driving SUVs. It was as if they felt that they had better be tough and strong and drive their stakes in. People's anxieties frequently played out in regard to objects of display and often manifested in struggles over borders and boundaries. Many of these efforts revealed means of seeking security that do not necessarily make you more secure—an affective structure resonant with what Lauren Berlant has termed "cruel optimism"[81]—or that secure your own "community"[82] at the expense of neighbors. Whatever form rugged entitlement took, it helped mask the reality that Charles Beard wrote against almost seventy years before: the state is often more focused on the concerns of corporate capital than on the everyday lives of its citizens.

FROM ZIMBABWE TO NEW JERSEY

Although my research for this book took place in New Jersey, the central questions I sought to answer emerged several years earlier in Zimbabwe.

I had been studying anthropology and critical pedagogy in college, and I decided to spend a semester abroad in Zimbabwe during the spring of 1991. Zimbabwe's independence was still quite new, and intense public discussions were under way on the nation's progress and regress in the decade since independence in 1980. With Zimbabwe's nation-state formation occurring at the dawn of a transformative decade in the workings of global capitalism, its post-settler state concerns about capital, labor, and land were infused with the pressures of new International Monetary Fund policies. My time in Zimbabwe thus proved to be a crash course in the paradoxical situation facing many nations in the Global South during those years: a strong commitment to the reform of problematic colonial legacies while at the same time increasing pressure to embark on economic structural adjustment. For many, efforts to open up the nation to foreign investment looked like economic imperialism, or colonialism in new clothes.

I continued to be compelled by this tension when I began my graduate studies in anthropology, particularly debates over how much "colonial" there might still be in the postcolonial subject. I spent my first two years developing a dissertation project to explore what it was like, particularly for upwardly mobile Zimbabwean youth, to come of age during a time of great debate about the ideal national subject. I wondered: how was this tension playing out in their everyday lives? And how might I ethnographically view quotidian moments of subject formation? I made plans to go back to Zimbabwe during the summer of 1995 to do preliminary research in an Anglican boarding school attended by one of the children from my semester-abroad homestay family. The school was part of what enabled her parents to transition from humble village childhoods to modest urban lower-middle-class adult lives.

When I got off the plane in Harare that summer, I had my first encounter with changing economic conditions from structural adjustment when I exchanged money. During my semester abroad, the value of the U.S. dollar in relation to the Zimbabwe dollar was one to three. In just over four years, it had become one to eight. Granted, the hyperinflation and humanitarian crisis to hit Zimbabwe in the years to follow makes the devaluation in 1995 pale in comparison. But at the time, it was a striking object lesson in concerns that had been raised in 1991 when the nation first started to

feel the effects of structural adjustment. The next day, I came across a lit-eral sign of those anticipated changes: "Deloitte & Touche," the name of a prominent multinational accounting-services firm, emblazoned across the top of an office building.

These changes were the topic of conversation the following Sunday with a young man who was a cousin of my homestay family. We were at the family's weekly post-church gathering, and he was venting frustration over rising unemployment and the depressed standard of living. He balked at those who had faith in structural adjustment and who had believed that the booming tourism and economic growth in Zimbabwe in 1991 would eventually come to benefit the majority of Zimbabweans. He then asked a poignant question: Why did Americans feel the need to "suck up the world's wealth" and claim that free-trade agreements would benefit every-one, when clearly they were in the best interest of Americans? He asked a good question. I at first (albeit somewhat defensively) remarked that not all Americans agreed with the practices of U.S. corporations and politi-cians. And yet, I acknowledged, most Americans do not think about the global effects of their everyday ways of being.

When I left Zimbabwe that summer, this conversation weighed heavily on my mind. On the one hand, the United States was indeed sucking up a lot of the world's wealth, and had been for quite some time. Yet the eco-nomic power of the United States was diminishing, and its bourgeoisie was anxiously scrambling to retool how it did business, including attempts to create new markets in places like Zimbabwe. But these efforts—what are often referred to under the rubric of "globalization" or "liberalization"—also involved the implementation of new policies and practices within the United States, leading to growing inequality and diminishing economic mobility in the United States as well, albeit on a different scale. It was clear in the fine print that amid the emerging Internet boom in the United States, the rich were becoming filthy rich, the poor were getting poorer, and many people previously positioned in the middle class were experienc-ing downward mobility or witnessing a growing expanse separating the middle and the upper middle classes. So while free-trade agreements and other political-economic policies were indeed in the interests of some Americans, there was an increasingly smaller number who were benefit-ting, and an alarmingly larger number being left behind.

My experiences in Zimbabwe and my studies in graduate school helped me realize that the economic theories behind structural adjustment in places like Zimbabwe came from the same roots as those propelling change in the United States, though in distinct ways. While it is now common in academic circles to refer to these logics under the rubric of *neoliberalism,* at the time a host of terms were used to encapsulate that moment in capitalism: *global, postmodern, post-industrial, post-Fordist, transnational, advanced liberal,* or simply *the new economy.* I always was drawn to the phrase *late capitalism,* because it encompassed the expectation of a crash.[83] An extensive body of literature had emerged on how the changing global economic order was affecting the poor and the working class, both abroad and in the United States.[84] There also was a growing research focus on the new global elite (i.e., those most benefitting from neoliberal policies, including free trade).[85] Yet less well studied was how the U.S. bourgeoisie's "faithful middlemen" were faring as middle-class security eroded.

What would it mean to bring the U.S. middle classes into global class theorizing? What might be the best approach in a place like the United States with a long history of discomfort with talking explicitly and realistically about class? How might studying "at home" answer my Zimbabwean friend's haunting question about Americans' sense of entitlement to their disproportionate share of the world's wealth? How might the anxious "longing to secure"[86] that characterizes the middle class play a role in shaping conditions that affect the present and future not only of people in Zimbabwe and the working class and poor worldwide, but also of the middle classes themselves?

When I decided to switch my research to the United States, I realized that the site for my new project was right in front of my eyes. I had been working for years with youth as a counselor and then as a group leader at a sleepaway summer camp in upstate New York. Each summer over the course of nine years (1989–97) I had several campers who were from Danboro.[87] Through the stories they told, the people they described, the moments they celebrated, and the frustrations they vented, I was consistently struck by the competitive intensity that permeated their depictions of life in Danboro, particularly when it came to objects of class display and the policing of social boundaries. As more and more kids from Danboro

started attending the camp over the years, "Danboro" turned into a sign. When uttered, it indexed a sense of entitlement. I did know a few kids from Danboro whose privilege and sense of entitlement were a pervasive part of their "common sense," so naturalized that they were not aware of how present it was. Yet all of the campers from Danboro whom I got to know quite well over the years belied such simple castings. I knew their hurts and their hopes, their humor and their warmth, as well as how they struggled with what it meant to be from Danboro. Being relatively privileged within the middle class, of course, does not mean that one does not experience pain or loss, nor that one cannot be sympathetic and generous. But at the same time, I was curious about how this penchant for class display and social gatekeeping was formed and what effects it might have on Danboro's youth and on the larger society in which they would live their lives.

From what I knew about Danboro youth, I was interested in how their parents' trajectories were a part of this story, playing a role in organizing the spaces through which their children moved; fueling the normative discourses that their children encountered; and thereby setting the conditions of possibility for their children's habitus. I had come to know many of their parents over the years. Most were from Brooklyn and had moved out of the city to suburban Danboro in the late 1970s and early 1980s to raise their children in a house with a lawn (rather than in cramped Brooklyn apartments) and to be in Danboro schools (as opposed to the struggling ones in their old urban neighborhoods). I got a sense from them of their awe over what their children had. They often joked about how they were "spoiling" their kids, which—they freely admitted—was exactly what they wanted for them: to have all the things they never had while growing up in working-class and lower-middle-class families. But I also knew that it was not easy for many parents to sustain their lifestyle, or to keep up with the increasing escalation of the suburban American dream that surrounded them in their town. There was often a hint of anxiousness as they spoke about the new things that they wanted, and the old things they took for granted like public schools and job security. In what ways did it matter that they got their piece of the American dream just as it was becoming harder to attain and maintain amid the rise of neoliberal approaches to governance and social welfare? How do parents' anxieties

and insecurities (which get projected and passed on to their children) fuel the regulation of naturalized class values and dispositions? This is, of course, a local story, specific to the articulation of the global economic system in a particular New Jersey suburb at the tail end of "white flight." Yet I would argue that by looking closer at a town like Danboro, we can not only understand how a transitional moment played out locally, but also gain a better understanding of its global effects.

"AT RISK" FOR ENTRENCHING RUGGED ENTITLEMENT

The Columbine massacre, in which two high school seniors went on an hourlong school-shooting spree before committing suicide, occurred almost a year and a half into my fieldwork. During casual conversations with many parents during the media-blitz aftermath of the incident, I often was asked to draw upon my knowledge of youth. People wanted to hear psychological theories about alienation and rage, popular-culture readings of the Goth scene, media studies on the effects of violent video games and Internet access, or anthropological understandings of peer culture. I had enough knowledge to comment peripherally on these issues, yet I always felt uncomfortable during these discussions. These were not the kinds of issues consuming my thoughts during the time I was spending in their town and in their daily lives. How could I justify dedicating several years of my life trying to figure out what makes white, middle- to upper-middle-class suburban teenagers (and their parents) "at risk" for entrenching rugged entitlement when people were trying to figure out which boy in their town might be "at risk" for going on a shooting rampage? I felt this uneasiness at other times when local crises arose, such as when a teenager ended up in the hospital after a heroin overdose or another from a suicide attempt, or when a girl had extreme anorexia or a boy had severe fits of anger during his parents' messy divorce. During all of these moments, I couldn't help but worry that my work on the development of classed subjectivities and spaces might seem frivolous in light of more tangible and pressing problems.

These incidents were exceptional moments. But there were many other instances throughout my fieldwork that raised more mundane concerns

that nevertheless were significant to people and also were not the focus of my work. One afternoon, for example, I was at the home of the Degen family (a pseudonym, as are all names throughout the book) to get official permission to be in my study, for which they had all agreed. Before they signed the permission forms, I reiterated that my research involved exploring what it was like to grow up during the boom economy in a town like Danboro. As Diane, seventeen-year-old Erika's mother, grabbed a pen to sign the forms, she patted Erika on the head, began to laugh, and teased that she looked forward to hearing more about "kids who grow up in good homes and amount to nothing!" Ken, Erika's father, was laughing at Diane's joke as he went to sign, but then he became more serious as he asked, "Why don't kids read anymore? If the book wasn't made into a movie, Erika doesn't know the story." It was then Erika's turn to sign, and she did so in awkward silence as her mother told me that she hoped I would be able to explain "why these kids still smoke cigarettes with all that we know about what it does to you." She understood why they sometimes smoked "the other stuff." "That's fun," she acknowledged, "but smoking cigarettes is just plain dumb." Needless to say, Erika began to squirm, particularly as her mother looked her straight in the eye and suggested that maybe they should go on a field trip to the cancer ward.

The questions that I explore in this book address concerns about youth that are rarely identified as "problems," big or small. I am not looking at the dysfunctional or even the slight dysfunctions among the functional. Rather, I am exploring how the functional function and how that way of being functional is produced, is a reflection of class shifts, and participates in regulating the capitalist system in increasingly neoliberal ways. I always had a hard time explaining what I meant by this when describing my work to families like the Degens, and why I relied on the Bourdieu-like wording in the previous sentence. I knew that there was a powerful connection between what I was studying and a variety of stressful aspects of their lives, even if the questions I pursued were not those that consumed them.

I came to see that one way to view the connection was to politically invert our use of "at risk" categories. "At risk" categories often reveal more about the problems of our society than the problems of the youth so categorized.[88] When there are so many young people growing up in communities with limited resources and discriminatory practices, are they "at risk,"

or is our society putting them at risk? Are they a threat to a healthy social order, or is it the lack of equity in regard to standard-of-living jobs, quality and affordable education and health care, and possibilities for mobility?[89] If the larger problem is the normative social order, what would it mean to transform "at risk" categories and focus on youth who represent supposed success stories, who are becoming "good" neoliberal subjects, and thus (if unwittingly) participating in exacerbating class and racial inequalities? Might that very "success" be the threat to a healthy social order?

The youth that you will meet in this book are all developing in line with the social order. When my fieldwork was over, they were heading off to college and were en route to achieving their own successes. In towns like Danboro, a determined drive to secure one's own place would—for the most part—be seen as evidence of a child's ability to make it in the world. No media, school, or state would worry, and no parents would seek to find the best treatment, the finest therapists, and the right medication.[90] And yet, as I argue, their seemingly harmless—even admirable—habits, desires, and practices put "at risk" the possibility that a new, more equitable social order might come into being. In not challenging the structural conditions that created financial pressures and related stressors in their lives, they, along with their parents, were digging themselves in deeper and limiting the possibility for imagining a society that would benefit all classes, races, and ages, including their own.

I say "their own" because middle-class youth no longer necessarily benefit from the social order, as class security becomes a privilege of the privileged few. More and more members of the middle class are experiencing downward mobility, and not coincidently, middle-class youth are being increasingly labeled "at risk," albeit in different ways than those suggested above.[91] These concerns are capitalized upon by industries ranging from pharmaceutical companies to mental-health providers.[92] White middle-class youth escape some of the more extreme effects of this discourse.[93] But they, too, are increasingly considered "at risk," particularly when they are believed not to be doing their part in regulating the capitalist order of things; or when they are not becoming the type of subject who can handle the volatility of the new global economic order; or when there is simply no longer a place for them in it. The explosion of medications for and categories of attention deficit disorder, depression, and anxiety is a case in point.[94]

It is therefore not only for the good of the less privileged classes to scruti-nize the development of habits, desires, and sentiments among "relatively privileged"[95] youth on track to success. It also is in their own interest, I would argue. Yet I do not focus exclusively on the experiences of youth in this book.[96] Their worlds cannot be understood without equal attention to the larger context of tensions in their town, intimate moments in their homes, normative discourses in their midst, their parents' class trajecto-ries, and the state of the political economy. The existing system gets natu-ralized, taken for granted, and regulated in their everyday lives, despite moments of ambivalence, questioning, and doubt.

THE PREDICAMENT OF BLAME IN A LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

I end this introduction with a caveat on the predicament of using people's lives as "evidence" in a story about the state of liberal democracy in the United States. The form of "critique" in which I engage in this book should not be confused with "criticism" in which individual *people* are considered "bad" or "wrong." Rather, it is, as Foucault has described it, a "historical analysis of the *limits* that are imposed on us."[97] Because of those limits, we tend to become what the common sense of our historical moment leads us to be. Yet the public discourse in the United States—profoundly shaped by the tenets of liberal ideology, which emphasizes personal responsibility over structural constraints—leads us to err on the side of locating blame in people rather than on the limited conditions of possibility in which they are continually becoming.[98] This has become even more pronounced amid the neoliberal ideological touting of self-governance.

The challenge of critiquing without criticizing plagued me while con-ducting fieldwork.[99] When having casual dinners at people's houses, driv-ing around town with them to visit their friends or to run an errand, or doing one-on-one interviews that often broached topics that were quite personal and intimate in nature, I constantly worried about the prospect of a misreading of my book as a condemnation of the people of Danboro. I knew that everyone would remain anonymous in the text through my use of pseudonyms and altered identifying details. But it still made me

uncomfortable to turn their lives into a text for public discussion. I ago-
nized over the possibility that those whose stories I tell—all warm and
welcoming people—might be judged or blamed for their ways of being
and for their small part in the entrenchment of neoliberalism, when my
ultimate goal was to understand the limits of what people (and the world)
were becoming in a pivotal historical moment.[100]

I realized that I had to either abandon the project or figure out how to
try to write the book in a way that highlights this reminder from Marx,
which Gramsci underscored: people tend to take on the common sense of
their time, more often than not. The people in this book, like all people
regardless of their class positioning, are just trying to live their lives within
the limits of what is possible, or at least what seems possible. It makes
sense that rugged entitlement was pervasive in a town like Danboro dur-
ing the late 1990s, as the postwar American dream was further chipped
away through a wave of sentiment in the nation against government-
sponsored entitlements and policies for individual people and local com-
munities (as opposed to corporate entities). Rather than blame *people* for
participating in the emergence and exaggeration of this structure of feel-
ing, our efforts are best served by trying to figure out how to switch its
direction in the many sites in which it still endures. This book is an
attempt to explore a bit of what we are up against.