As a passenger on a small minibus making its way north to the capital of Moldova in the summer of 2004, I was accompanied by my toddler daughter and stepmother, along with eight other passengers packed in elbow to elbow. One young woman sitting next to me was departing for a housekeeping job in Moscow. She was leaving her ten-month-old daughter in the care of her husband and mother for the second time since the child was born. After the three-hour bus journey Sveta would continue her trek from Chișinău via an overnight train to Moscow. She sighed with resignation that she didn’t know exactly when she would be seeing her daughter again. Sveta’s daughter, like nearly one-quarter of children in Moldova, was growing up with at least one parent away as a labor migrant (UNICEF 2009).

When our planeload of passengers bound for Chișinău was significantly delayed at Istanbul’s Atatürk International Airport in 2011 I heard yet another account of how a family was raising a child through a transnational nurturing arrangement. Tania, a friendly woman with long blonde hair and bright blue eyes who was returning to her family in a small town in Gagauzia, told me that since 1997 she had traveled to Istanbul for regular stints working as a domestic for six months at a time. She and her husband rented an apartment and took turns traveling for short visits home to Moldova. Tania’s sixteen-year-old son was barely two years old when she and her husband began leaving him with his grandparents; as she told me, “I thought a long time about leaving my son, but in the end it really helped when I told myself that lots of women have done this, and it is really necessary for me to raise him this way; he is a smart boy and wants to go on to study mathematics.”
I encountered many young women like Sveta and Tania reflecting on their negotiations around mothering from a distance, arrangements that often extended from their children’s infancy well into early adulthood. In many instances, as children grew they were cared for by a close relative who oversaw daily needs, while mothers’, and less often fathers’, remittances financed basic necessities and educational opportunities, like private school or music lessons, as Daria and Niki had done for their daughters. In interacting even briefly with migrant women, I would hear about the decisions women were making regarding their children and implicitly about what I call a “transnational nurturing nexus,” or the complex ways that families and households were providing for children by combining historical caregiving practices with investment in transnational circuits of mobility (Rouse 1992; Hewlett 2013) extending primarily between Istanbul and southern Moldova but also to Russia, Romania, and sometimes even farther from home. In this chapter I explore the idea of a transnational nurturing nexus involving “other mothers,” as well as state-funded institutions such as day cares, in an effort to move beyond a focus on mother-centered care as a cultural universal (Glenn 1994) and, instead, to direct attention to the diverse, historically situated practices that shape nurturing.  

As women migrants like Sveta and Tania shared their reasoning with me about having others care for their children, I wondered about these decisions and the specific contours of this transnational nurturing nexus. I learned that children left for years in the care of their grandmothers or aunts sometimes referred to them as “mama,” and when called to the phone or to a Skype conversation to speak with long absent biological mothers, children would be called to speak with their “other mother,” in Russian drugaia mama. Children’s separations from parents were not always easy, sometimes requiring reconfigurations of households or creating strains for parent-child relationships, but such caregiving practices were common, and nurturing by “other mothers” has a long history in the region, dating to well before Moldova’s incorporation into the Soviet Union. Overall, I trace my argument about other mothers in Moldova in connection with a tradition of feminist scholarship on nurturing, mothering, and “othermothering.” I argue for thinking about the transnational nurturing nexus many southern Moldovan women are part of as shaped by global economic restructuring and demands for gendered labor but also as rooted in local histories of nurturing practices. In the pages that follow I consider the local histories of “other mothering” in southern Moldova, but first I turn to some ways scholars have theorized about motherhood.

**Other Mothers and Shifting the Center**

Beginning in the 1970s feminist scholars looked to find universal frameworks for understanding gender inequality (Lewin and Silverstein 2016, 10–12). Around
the same time influential theories examining mothering as a social practice emerged (Glenn 1994, 4–5), and these prompted an abundance of research and debate dedicated to the diverse forms nurturing can take and the relative weight of biological and cultural factors (Stack 1974; Collier et al. 1982; Moore 1988; Scheper-Hughes 1989; Collins 1990, 1994). Black feminist scholars posed one of the strongest critiques of universalizing theories, with Patricia Hill Collins (1994) arguing that feminist theorizing paid scant attention to particular ideas about motherhood and the contexts in which they were generated. Collins writes, “Black women’s experiences as bloodmothers, othermothers, and community othermothers reveal that the mythical norm of heterosexual, married couple, nuclear family with a nonworking spouse and a husband earning a ‘family wage’ is far from being natural, universal and preferred, but instead is deeply embedded in specific race and class formations” (1990, 222–23). Collins urges us to be attentive to the diverse experiences of motherhood and, instead of pursuing generalizable theories, to “shift the center” of analysis to provide a more rich understanding of human experience (1994, 61–62).

Like Collins, a number of feminist anthropologists have critically assessed how motherhood, class, and assumptions about divisions between public and private spheres play out in different locations (Clark 1999; Berdahl 1999; Freeman 2007). In her study of market women in Ghana, Gracia Clark found that middle-class, Western ideals of “self-effacing, homebound wife and mother” that were on the rise from the 1980s into the 1990s (1999, 719) did not map easily across cultural contexts and time. Instead, she documented the way women’s paid work among market women in Ghana was seen as an integral part of motherhood. Likewise, Daphne Berdahl (1999) demonstrated how, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, socialist frameworks combining positive valuations of work and motherhood collided with discourses placing women firmly in the home; East German women were no longer meant to be “worker-mothers,” with women’s paid labor highly valued along with their reproductive roles, and instead they became simply “mother-consumers” (Berdahl 1999).

More than twenty years earlier, in what remains a touchstone for scholars interested in a critical analysis of mothering, Carol Stack (1974) authored an ethnography of a community of midwestern African Americans living in the “flats.” Stack’s work contested deeply held assumptions about the forms mothering and nurturing could take in North America and showed how kin and those providing nurturing are “those you can count on.” Stack’s important study was one of the first to powerfully point to the central role of kin and networks—what some scholars, like Collins (1990), would later call “othermothers,” rather than biological mothers—as a basis for nurturing and community, especially for people on the margins.
In thinking about nurturing practices in southern Moldova I draw on the rich scholarship around mothering and motherhood as I reflect on “othermothers”—the various people, not always biologically related to children, doing caregiving in southern Moldova—and “other mothers,” the relationship that Nelli’s granddaughter and others sometimes invoked in referring to their often physically absent biological mothers. While the former emphasizes the mothering practices of those other than a biological mother, the latter focuses on “other” or “different” ways of being a (biological) mother, including by providing material and emotional support from a distance. The phrase “other mothers” preserves how this idea was expressed in southern Moldova, emphasizing biological mothers as the “other mothers”—not the primary caregivers but still taking part in a transnational nurturing nexus in a different, or “other,” way that involved channeling resources in the form of remittances without being physically present. Although my emphasis is on “other mothering,” namely how biological mothers who are not physically present but nevertheless take part in mothering practices, both processes, “other mothering” by transnational migrant mothers and “othermothering” by a wide network of people, are at work in southern Moldova.

Scholars have shown how “othermothering,” “child shifting,” and child fosterage are critical for communities throughout the world, especially as heightened precarity brought about by an intensified global economy compels family members to be absent as transnational labor migrants from months to years on end (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Schmalzbauer 2004; Leinaweaver 2010; Bledsoe and Sow 2011; Chamberlain 2013). Based on her ethnographic research among British-Caribbean families, Mary Chamberlain argues that child fostering or “child shifting”—with grandmothers raising grandchildren in Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad while their parents migrate for work in Britain—is a practice that has emerged over hundreds of years (2013, 305). In dispelling dominant theories focused on an idea of adaptation to economic circumstance, Chamberlain instead shows how such a family formation preceded even migration movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and can be seen as enabling migration, rather than being a consequence of it (2013, 305). Likewise, Jessaca Leinaweiver (2010) shows how historically grounded practices of child fosterage in Peru insure companionship for aging parents, even while children are provided for, thereby enabling parents to engage in transnational migration to Spain.

Southern Moldovan women’s experience of other mothering has parallels with experiences portrayed both in the rich literature on African American mothering practices and in the emerging literature on transnational nurturing practices being forged by diverse migrants. While I did not encounter the phenomenon of “community othermothers” that Leah Schmalzbauer (2004), Chamberlain (2013), and Collins (1990) describe, where a nonbiological mother takes
it on herself to serve as a community resource and support for a wide number of nonkin children, nurturing of children by “othermothers,” and most often grandmothers or aunts, was common among the households I came to know. Most significantly, southern Moldovan women’s experiences of arranging for othermothering for children, like that described by Chamberlain (2013) for the Caribbean and Leinaweaver (2010) for Peru, demonstrate that this type of family formation is not just a desperate attempt to provide care for children. Instead it is a dynamic, historically based practice that enables women to become long-term labor migrants and provide substantially for their households. Nevertheless, migrant mothers’ transnational mobility has also brought about a specific form of “other mothering” that is defined by nurturing from a distance. Migrant mothers have widely become the primary providers for households and thereby brought about changes in the long-term nurturing nexus in the region.

Nurturing from a Distance

A growing scholarship on transnational parenting examines so-called nurturing from a distance, an experience increasingly common for migrant men and women who are forced to leave children in the care of others for long periods of time. In particular, recent work on transnational parenting has asked how children fare under such arrangements. Overall, the absence of parents who nevertheless send remittances means improved material circumstances for children left behind, and while generally children initially express some degree of emotional distress, many are genuinely loved and provided for by caregivers (Gamburd 2000, 199; Mazzucato and Schans 2011, 705). A number of studies have argued that children left behind may benefit materially while suffering at an emotional level (Schmalzbauer 2004; Parreñas 2005; UNICEF 2009). However, other studies have found the situation to be more complicated (see Carling 2012; Vanore et al. 2015). One study of well-being among children of migrant men in Southeast Asia suggests that the experience of transnational caregiving may be significantly shaped by cultural and historical factors (Graham and Jordan 2011). The researchers found that in two countries, Thailand and Indonesia, children expressed a sense of poor psychological well-being when their fathers were migrants, compared to children whose fathers were not migrants. In two other countries, Vietnam and the Philippines, there was no difference noted for children of migrant and nonmigrant fathers. Likewise, in a survey focused on the psychosocial well-being of Moldovan children aged four to seventeen with and without migrant parents, contrary to widespread assumptions, Michaella Vanore et al. (2015) found that children’s psychosocial health was not directly determined by whether they had migrant parents. However, they did find that the gender of a child—overall, boys tended
to fare worse than girls, especially if the father was absent—the gender of the migrant parent, and the caregiving arrangement all affected if and to what extent parents’ migration corresponded to a decrease in a child’s psychosocial health (2015, 258). All these studies provide a valuable perspective on how children fare, but they do not substantially consider the cultural practices and larger “nurturing nexus” that also shapes the experience of transnational nurturing.

In a few contexts, especially in Southeast Asia (Parreñas 2005; Graham and Jordan 2011) and Latin America (Schmalzbauer 2004; Leinaweaver 2010), the challenges of transnational nurturing are increasingly the focus of scholarly attention. In other locations, like the former Soviet Union, despite the widespread practice of women’s transnational labor migration, local nurturing practices have not been widely researched in light of this mobility (however, see Keough 2006; Leifsen and Tymczuk 2012). The few references to transnational parenting in this region tend to make generalizations about contemporary migration as causing a deterioration of the “traditional family” and about what form nurturing practices take (e.g., nuclear families raising children) (Elrick 2008, 1513). Instead, I turn attention to what one scholar (Carsten 1995) has called “indigenous ways of acting out and conceptualizing connections between people,” or “relatedness,” to emphasize how nurturing practices are understood locally. As transnational mobility has recently come to define a life stage of young people in a number of locations, these conditions may forge new ways of connecting between parents and children, but they also build on practices that were already in circulation prior to the escalation in mobility brought about by weakened states and an intensified global economy. In focusing on the transnational nurturing nexus, or various elements contributing locally and across borders to realize caregiving in southern Moldova, we can gain a sense of local forms of relatedness without resorting to models of cultural practices that would frame these as dysfunctional.

Mother Love and “Not Enough” Care

The stories I came to hear over and over in Moldova point to the personal costs of “mothering from a distance” but not necessarily to a sense of “abandonment” and “not enough” care that Rhacel Parreñas, for instance, traces for Filipino children left behind by migrating mothers (2005, 125–30). Parreñas details the ways in which the media and the Philippine government perpetuate a prevalent public sentiment that mothers “should” be providing intensive daily care for their children. This public sentiment, in turn, vilifies absent transnational mothers (but not fathers) for being insufficient nurturers, a refrain some of the youth in Parreñas’s study also voiced. Parreñas’s analysis revolves tightly around gender discourses that frame women as needing to be “martyr moms” (2005, 109),
performing intensive nurturing practices even at a distance, in their efforts to avoid castigation. Parreñas emphasizes an untroubled link between dominant discourses and internalized gender ideals in the Philippines but leaves local histories, class inflections, and cultural practices around nurturing relatively unexplored.

Despite significant work on the implications of transnational parenting, within this literature there is little focus on variation across space and time in regard to nurturing practices. The important critique of “natural” bonds of “attachment” and “mother love” between children and parents, especially mothers (e.g., Scheper-Hughes 1989; Franzblau 2002), tends to get lost in writings on transnational mobility, as does the vibrant literature on “othermothers” and diverse forms of kinship (e.g., Stack 1974; Collins 1990). Instead, idealized middle-class forms of mother love and universal emotions are too easily reinscribed in portrayals of the pain of separation for women migrants and their children, leaving little room for thinking about diverse nurturing practices.

In taking a different approach, my portrayal of Moldovan migrants and their families parallels the work of scholars writing ethnography of the “particular” (Abu-Lughod 1991; Gamburd 2000; Constable 2003), which emphasizes stories, local practices, and history with the aim of avoiding the homogenization of difference. I show how the other mothering I encountered in Moldova and Istanbul does not simply reflect ruptures in care brought about by transnational mobility and pressures of global capitalism. Instead, it is part of a nurturing nexus of multiple layers of care. This nurturing nexus includes parents, grandparents, and extended kin but also state-sponsored spaces like day-care centers and residential schools. Intimate practices of child rearing were reconfigured with the end of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic pressures placed on households. In addition, there are continuities in the logics of nurturing drawn from an earlier era of caregiving. I argue that the prevalent practice of children being raised by “othermothers” with “other mothers” (biological mothers who are physically absent) taking part to various degrees, is integrally tied to the “other” forms of nurturing that have defined this region over the past century, including as state structures sought to transform how women balanced their lives as workers and mothers.

**Mothercraft and Maternalist Policies from the Soviet to the Post-Soviet Eras**

From the beginning of the Soviet era, motherhood posed an ideological challenge for the state. The state sought to transform women into productive citizens who could be worker-mothers, contributing to building the new socialist society
through their role in the workforce and through their education of new generations. Nevertheless, in the early 1920s to 1930s, as urban migration flourished and at least twenty-three million men and women moved from rural areas into urban centers to take up work, children were not welcome and were generally seen as a “burden” preventing women from being productive workers (Denisova 2010, 56). Motherhood and traditional child-rearing practices were frequently framed as standing in the way of forging a new, industrialized society; and new forms of “mothercraft,” or means of caring for and educating young children, were introduced to address this problem (Waters 1992, 123; Ransel 2000; Kirschenbaum 2001).

Within months of the 1917 Revolution, village women especially, seen to be steeped in religious and “backward” ideas, became the primary subjects of efforts to transform childbearing and child-rearing practices. Without any tsarist network of public kindergartens or day-care centers in place, educators had a daunting task; even in Moscow in 1917 only 2 percent of the preschool-age children attended any form of kindergarten (Kirschenbaum 2001, 37). As part of their vision of “social upbringing” (vospitanie), the Bolsheviks planned to establish nearly five thousand preschools across the Soviet Union by the early 1920s. These goals were not easily met in the conditions of civil war that extended for more than three years after the Bolsheviks came to power, and by 1919 even in urban centers, only 5–12 percent of all preschool-age children were served by these newly imagined educational institutions (Kirschenbaum 2001, 38). More than a decade later, even though there was a significant increase in preschool institutions, the majority of children did not attend them and, in fact, fewer children attended them in 1931 than in 1921.

This gradual reduction in preschool programs between 1921 and 1931 was partly due to the economic constraints faced by the Soviet Union but more to a shift in political aims. The retrenchment in social policy embodied in the new family code of 1926 not only reinscribed conservative social mores around marriage and sexuality but also reinstated the family as critical to forging new socialist citizens (Goldman 1993). The state’s prior commitment to the “withering away” of the family and supplanting parents with preschool institutions gradually waned. Instead, “small comrades” were to be forged though the joint efforts of newly “socialist” families and preschools (Kirschenbaum 2001).

Along with what Lisa Kirschenbaum calls the “unabashed sentimentalization of motherhood” that emerged by the mid-1930s (2001, 133), child-care programs were once again officially expanded, including with plans to extend into rural areas. New family code legislation in 1936 also introduced a range of maternity benefits, including monetary payments for low-income mothers and mothers with “many” children, repercussions for fathers shirking alimony payments, and more prenatal
and postnatal medical care (Denisova 2010, 73–74). However, due to inadequate staffing, lack of political will at local levels, and unequal access to social benefits for urban and rural dwellers, many of the legislated changes remained only on paper, especially in rural areas, until after the Second World War.

The most significant components of the campaigns to transform mothercraft involved establishing rural health care centers and child-care facilities, both of which were ultimately important for women’s participation in the newly collectivized agriculture (Kuroglo and Filimonova 1976; Ransel 2000, 44–79). The Soviet government was especially anxious to expand the availability of child care, both to induce women to have more children and to incorporate more women into the paid workforce; between 1928 and 1940 the number of day-care centers across the Soviet Union increased more than tenfold, with collective farms often providing child care in some form (Denisova 2010, 165).7 Still, these efforts remained particularly fraught with internal tensions around pronatalist policies, on the one hand, and prolabor policies with insubstantial social support for families, on the other (Kirschenbaum 2001).8 As an illustration of this situation, Eva, the woman whose household hosted me during extended stays in southern Moldova, recounted how stressful it was for her to get to work on time when her son was in preschool in the mid-1980s. Having her son in preschool made it possible for her to take on a position of responsibility at the hospital, but because the preschool opened at the same time she had to be at work, and she absolutely could not be late for work, she had frequently had to leave off her five-year-old to wait ten minutes outside the gate while she rushed off.

As late as the 1970s, child care was still not plentiful, especially in rural areas. For children under two years old there were widespread shortages, but also for three- to five-year-olds day-care shortages were widely recognized (Madison 1972, 831–32). In urban areas fewer than 50 percent of all eligible children attended day care, and in rural areas only 30 percent. In the early 1970s in the Vulcănești region, there were reportedly twenty day-care centers, as well as some “seasonal” ones, established under the aegis of collective farms (Kuroglo and Filimonova 1976, 30), yet a shortage of adequate child care persisted. This meant that in most rural areas, like the majority of Moldova, through the 1970s young children were being cared for primarily by family members, often by grandmothers who were retired from wage work.

In rural areas the crisis around child care was exacerbated by the lack of provision for maternity leaves. Under Soviet law all able-bodied people of working age were required to work (outside their homes). However, until the late 1960s only urban women had access to maternity leave and child care (Denisova 2010, 78–80). (Two to four months’ maternity leave was granted to urban women as early as the 1930s.) Only in 1965 were rural women who were employed in
collective farms granted maternity leaves of two-and-a-half months, and only in 1968–1969 were rural dwellers granted the same pensions, sick leaves, and maternity leaves as urban dwellers (Ransel 2000, 131; Denisova 2010, 73–80). Furthermore, in many rural areas, like southern Moldova, women waited well into the late 1970s to gain access to post- and prenatal care (Ransel 2000, 239). The biggest changes to the provision of social support for women and children were felt in the 1980s, when financing for children’s hospitals, maternity wards, and prenatal centers significantly increased (Denisova 2010, 172). 9

Despite the long-term rural crisis around health care and child care, even as early as the 1920s the Soviet state established boarding schools or residential schools (shkoly internaty) to educate school-age children and support women balancing the demands of motherhood and work (Makarenko 1973; Waters 1992, 128; Bloch 2003a). 10 Initially these schools were also envisioned as places for children to gain access to a specialized education, for young street children to learn technical skills, or for indigenous Siberians to be inculcated with Soviet state-defined values. After the Second World War, when mother-headed households were common and the Soviet Union was extremely short on people of working age to join the labor force, residential schools of various types expanded countrywide to train students in vocational skills and make it possible for parents to work long hours (Ambler 1961; Ipsa 1994). In Moscow shuttle traders (and other Muscovites) told me that in the 1940s and 1950s, when their parents had long factory shifts, it was not uncommon for children to be left during the week at a residential school and only go home to parents on their day off. This system functioned into the post-Soviet era as well. For instance, in central Siberia in the early 1990s a number of indigenous Siberian women educators told me they were able to complete their professional training by periodically leaving their children in the local residential school while they traveled, sometimes over two thousand miles, to attend professional meetings or meet the biannual in-person exam requirements of distance education programs based in Leningrad (St. Petersburg).

Likewise, in southern Moldova people recounted how in the difficult post-Second World War years, as well as more recently, residential schools played an important role in cases when parents had no relatives with whom to leave children or grandparents were not capable of taking on the responsibility of caring for children. As in the case of an elderly woman I met in Vulcănești in 2004, who was petitioning to care for her grandson over the summer when he was not in school and his parents were still away as labor migrants, sometimes the residential schools worked in conjunction with parents or other relatives to care for children. Today there is a move away from any form of institutional care as Moldova undergoes a reform of its educational and child welfare systems and
seeks out ways, including new forms of social support and financial payments, to have children remain in households, if not with parents or close family members (Kaufman 2009; UNICEF 2009). As I explore below, not only the systems of child care, but also public culture around parenting, and especially mothercraft, is again shifting in southern Moldova, as it is across many parts of the former Soviet Union.

Postsocialist Nurturing and “Maternalist” Ideals

Over the 1990s and early 2000s in Russia and neighboring formerly socialist states, legislation emerged that reflects shifting ideals around motherhood and a turn toward increasingly “maternalist” or “familialist” policies. While recognizing the benefits of these policies, scholars have critiqued them for elevating motherhood to a sacred role to which women should aspire above all else and for contributing to growing gender inequality (Temkina and Rotkirch 1997; Rivkin-Fish 2010; Fodor and Kispeter 2014). In the case of Russia, in the first decade of the 2000s new policy measures significantly expanded socialist-era concerns with the “protection” of motherhood and children and instituted substantial financial benefits. For instance, in the last years of the Soviet era legislation was put in place that increased maternity pay and leave until a child turned three and also created a one-time payment to mothers at the time of a child’s birth. Subsequent revisions to legislation in a post-Soviet era further inscribed maternalist ideals in a number of ways, including by extending maternity leave benefits to those adopting children, by guaranteeing full wages paid to mothers for up to eighteen months’ leave, and by creating a provision for single mothers to receive child benefits until their child turned sixteen (Rotkirch et al. 2007; Denisova 2010, 168). Further legislation supported by President Vladimir Putin promoted an explicit pronatalist policy, where a one-time “maternity capital” payment of $10,000 would be paid to each family that had a second child.

In Moldova, as of 2016 there was no substantial “maternity capital” payment, but the state has nevertheless invested in maternalist policies that are meant to maintain the well-being of women and children. In 2014 benefits related to children were composed of three parts: maternity benefits, a “child-raising” allowance paid for up to three years, and a one-time birth payment. For maternity benefits, in theory women could receive 100 percent of their average earnings from the thirtieth week of pregnancy, for a total of 126 days. The child-raising allowance could be paid for up to three years and was calculated as 30 percent of a mother’s average income for the six months preceding the birth. The one-time birth payment was 2,600 lei (about $177 in 2016) for a first child and 2,900 lei (about $190) for each additional child (US Social Security Administration 2014, 208–12).
I met several women who returned from their work in Turkey or Russia to give birth and take maternity leave, but this was not simple. Although they could receive the one-time birth payment, because they worked outside Moldova and they had not paid into the social security system, they were only eligible to receive the child-raising allowance for eighteen months, at a fixed amount of 300 lei per month (less than $15 in 2016). Furthermore, if they returned to their work abroad, they became ineligible to receive the monthly maternity benefit. Given the relatively meager material benefit, many women, like Sveta, the woman I met on the bus who was leaving her ten-month-old for the second time to return to work in Moscow, curtailed their maternity leaves. Instead they sought alternative care for their children so they could return to work within months of the birth of a child.

In addition to the various ways that post-Soviet states have sought to define how children are cared for, households have developed their own ways of providing for children, often drawing on historical patterns of care. In the late Soviet period it was common for children in urban households to spend long summer vacations with grandparents, and even to be primarily cared for by a maternal grandmother until they went to school at age seven, thereby freeing mothers and fathers to fully devote themselves to full-time study or work. While scholars have documented the long history of “extended mothering” in Russia (Rotkirch 2004, 160), wherein mothers, and especially grandmothers and less often a network of family and friends, take on parts of caregiving for children, the practice seems to be transforming. In Tatiana Tianynen-Qadir’s (2016) study among border-crossing Russian-Finnish grandmothers she shows how parenting in western Russia was rarely concentrated just within a tight nuclear household of mother-father-children, and today grandmothers also incorporate border crossing as a key nurturing practice in households. In urban Russia Jennifer Utrata (2011) writes about a striking increase in recent years of mother-grandmother-children households, what she calls “co-mothering,” with little or no involvement of fathers (Utrata 2011). The extent of grandparent involvement is reflected in survey research among young adults in Moscow who were born in Russia in the 1990s. Of those surveyed, one-third had a grandparent (usually a grandmother) as a member of their immediate household, and three-quarters said that they had at least weekly contact with a grandparent. Most said they had a more intimate relationship with their grandmother than with either of their parents (Semenova and Thompson 2004, 126–27). In southern Moldova households have also historically employed their own versions of “co-mothering” and “extended mothering” to raise children, a pattern of care that women migrants described as intensifying as they were drawn into transnational labor migration with the end of the Soviet Union.
Nurturing from a Distance: Five Women’s Narratives

The forms of intimacy maintained with children and the role of caregivers were woven into wider narratives of women’s efforts to migrate to Istanbul. Women recounted extended family support for children and often took for granted the historical practices of parents being separated from children for long periods of time. Frequently narratives pointed to domestic abuse, alcoholism, or the death of a partner during his stint as a labor migrant in Moscow as triggering women’s own journeys as labor migrants. Even when male relatives were alive and active members of a household, they frequently had secondary responsibility for children, with children living instead with a female relative or close friend of the family.

Caregivers were not left entirely on their own to care for children, and younger children up to the age of seven often attended one of the six town-administered day-care centers for part of the day, while children from the age of seven attended one of the town’s several schools. I had an opportunity to meet some of the primary caregivers bringing children to day care in 2004 when my daughter attended day care in Vulcănești. I learned that of the twenty-two children in my daughter’s group, nearly half of them were living with a grandmother. I also learned from grandmothers that they considered their daughters to be too tough on their kids. The grandmothers complained that children found it hard when their mothers occasionally visited, especially since mothers were inconsistent with disciplining children and rarely adhered to the schedule the grandmothers had established for their grandchildren. Much like the caregivers for children of transnational migrants in Honduras (Schmalzbauer 2004, 1325), grandmothers I spoke to confided that they were ultimately relieved each time the parents’ visits were over and they traveled back to work, because the children could finally resume their familiar routines. The fact that grandmothers were caring for grandchildren while daughters were away working was not viewed as a tragedy, just the most recent wrinkle in a long history of caregiving practices in the region.

As the following portraits of Raia, Maria, Niki, Polina, and Bella show, women negotiate a wide range of nurturing arrangements and in this way are deeply enmeshed in a transnational nurturing nexus.

Extended Nurturing: Raia

Raia, the woman who took her mother’s advice to become Ahmet’s girlfriend, is in many ways typical of women from multigenerational, extended families in southern Moldova (Kuroglo and Filimonova 1976; Guboglo 2006). In 2005 of her four siblings only Raia was in Istanbul, while one of her three brothers was working
in St. Petersburg and the other two remained at home in Gagauzia. The brother working in St. Petersburg was married to a seventeen-year-old girl who lived with Raia’s parents, waiting for her young husband to return and meanwhile completing high school. The other two brothers at home were teenagers and still in school but in some ways considered to be adults. One of them had a girlfriend, a teenage girl who had also come to live with Raia’s parents. Given their professions—Raia’s father was a carpenter and her mother a former state farm laborer—they could barely support themselves and their five dependents (the two sons and daughters-in-law, plus Raia’s young son). Raia’s economic contributions to the household were critical and followed the pattern established by her mother who, prior to being diagnosed with cancer, also briefly sent remittances home from Istanbul when she worked as a live-in domestic looking after children and cleaning.

Raia first decided to depart for Turkey after she left her husband; he used to beat her and lock her in the cellar when he got drunk. She was relieved to escape that situation. In 2006 Raia showed me a picture of her then five-year-old son dressed in a cowboy outfit she had sent from Istanbul. Raia moved her finger over his image and gave him an air kiss. She explained that while leaving her son with her parents for several years in a row was not easy, it was preferable to being home with no money. In the summer of 2006 Raia was especially proud of being able to send a red bicycle home for her son.

In some ways Raia’s transnational nurturing practices, like those of many migrant mothers I met, fit with Anna Rotkirch’s (2004b) description of “extended mothering,” as involving mothers, grandmothers, and a network of family and friends, and linking rural and urban spaces. In a similar way, the transnational circuits of post-Soviet women’s migration into Turkey are partly defined by the nurturing of children. In sending regular remittances and material goods home, Raia was enmeshed in a nurturing nexus involving aunts, uncles, and grandparents who cared for her son at home; the extended family enabled her to pursue work in Turkey and to maintain the transnational flow of resources.

Grandmothering from Afar: Maria

Unlike Raia, Maria, the woman who married a retired shoemaker in Turkey, did not have the benefit of a large extended household. Maria was compelled to leave Moldova in part because, like so many middle-aged migrant men who worked in Russia in the early 1990s, Maria’s husband died in a work-related accident in Moscow while employed at a poorly regulated construction brigade (Reeves 2013; Bloch 2014). Shortly after this tragedy, Maria left for Turkey, sending a teenage daughter to live with her aunt and study in Moscow and leaving two sons, aged ten and twelve at the time, with a close friend’s family in Moldova.
Maria recalled how the friend who first convinced her to travel to Istanbul had a husband who was willing to stay home with their children, his daughter and Maria’s two sons. Only later did Maria convince her own sister to look after the sons, but that did not work out either since the remittances she sent home were, in Maria’s words, “drunk and squandered.” Maria described how in her absence her sons ran around town “hungry” (golodnye) and were always on the streets playing without supervision. With her husband’s family estranged, and her natal family back in Latvia, it was a constant struggle for Maria to arrange adequate caregiving for the children.\(^{16}\)

Maria’s sons did not finish high school, and although this was a disappointment for Maria, she was initially happy when they came to live with her in Istanbul. Soon after, however, supporting them became difficult. The sons made more than $100/week working in a wholesale garment storefront, but they spent all their income on drinking and socializing, leaving their mother to pay the rent and cover food expenses for the household. When, in 2004, Maria fell in love with her future husband and soon married him, Maria was faced with a difficult decision; her husband did not smoke or drink, and although he was generally calm, Maria feared that he would be unwilling to live long with her rather wild sons. Coming to Turkey had been about supporting her sons’ future, but now they had chosen their own paths and Maria was hesitant to allow her sons to ruin her chance to be happy.

Despite resolving to pursue some of her own aspirations, however, Maria’s case also reflects a situation faced by a number of middle-aged women migrants I met who arrived in Istanbul in the mid-1990s to support young children or to help their older children pay for the cost of higher education. Once these children had grown, they sometimes continued to rely on their parents. As Maria said, “I am so tired; when will it stop? Each month I send off money to my children but it is time for them to work!” In 2013 Maria continued to send money, especially to aid her sons but also for her grandchildren in Moscow and Moldova.

When Maria’s sons were deported from Turkey in 2007 and returned to live again in Moldova, one of them fathered a child. Although Maria’s son did not play a role in his daughter’s life, Maria felt compelled to provide some support for the mother of her grandchild. In this way, too, Maria was not unlike many mothers I met who were sending money and clothing to their grown children and grandchildren located both in Moldova and Moscow. In some cases this was in the form of a gift, not critical to the monthly household operations. However, as Tianynen-Qadir (2016) shows for transnational grandmothers moving between Russia and Finland, migrant grandmothers in Turkey were often an important source of support for young families, especially when the men were unable to work, had abandoned their families, or had become casualties of industrial
accidents. In some ways this was a permutation of widespread nurturing practices in southern Moldova, just on a transnational scale. While transnational grandmothers’ support was not automatic, more often than not grandmothers remained central to household incomes or, as in the following case, to caregiving for grandchildren.

Other Mothering and Cell Phones: Niki and Nelli

As women work abroad to provide for children, often sending substantial remittances home to finance their care and education, they participate in caregiving to varying degrees that can shift over time. Numerous factors influence their caregiving, including the amount of remittances they send and the degree to which caregivers depend on these remittances, the levels of intimacy between women and other caregivers, and the access mothers, children, and caregivers have to communication technologies. In contrast to those like Maria, whose children came of age in the early 2000s, for migrants arriving in Istanbul even just a few years later, the possibilities for communication had radically changed how women maintained ties with children and caregivers. If in 2002 one domestic worker in Turkey told me she felt fortunate to have found a relatively well-paying job where her employers would pay for her to make two phone calls home each month, by 2004 cell phone access had made such a benefit all but obsolete. Cell phone calls from Turkey to Moldova had become relatively inexpensive, and text messaging had become part of daily interaction. This technology was also key to my introduction to Niki; I first spoke to Niki in 2003 during one of her phone calls to her mother, Nelli, in Vulcănești.

In 2007 in Istanbul my daughter and I frequently met Niki when she would invite us to the wholesale clothing store where she worked as a shop assistant. One afternoon over tea at the store and later at her apartment around the corner where we enjoyed nonalcoholic beer as we watched a Bollywood film dubbed in Turkish, Niki spoke about her attempts to provide for her teenage daughter back home in Moldova. Like many men in the years immediately following the end of the Soviet Union, Niki’s husband went looking for work in Moscow in the early 1990s. The first few years he was away, he returned home every few months, but by the mid-1990s his visits were more sporadic. Niki lived with her mother and her infant daughter, and they struggled to get by, given the small maternity benefit Niki received and the long stretches when her mother’s salary as a bus driver went unpaid. Ultimately, Niki and her husband were separated, and Niki decided to go to Turkey.

Niki’s mother, Nelli, had just returned from a stint in Turkey, so she was able to advise Niki on the best way to find work and how to avoid trouble with the local
police. Like the mothers of many of Niki’s friends and classmates, Nelli agreed to become the primary caregiver for her five-year-old granddaughter. Niki’s daughter eventually got to know her father, but for nearly seven years she did not see him, and she came to think of her mother, who visited for several weeks once or twice a year, as her “other mother,” and her grandmother as “mama.” Nelli was proud of this relationship, and in recounting her granddaughter’s early years said: “I was the one who always bathed her, even when her mother was home. . . . I took care of her.”

Niki tried hard to be in frequent communication with her mother and daughter. For the first several years it was expensive to call, but the advent of widely available and affordable cellular phone service by 2004 radically changed the intensity of contact migrants could maintain with home. Calling became affordable, and texting and Skype opened up a world of frequent instant contact. Both when I met Niki in 2005 and in subsequent years when I visited her in Istanbul, she maintained close ties with her mother and daughter by calling or texting with them several times a day. Niki worried about her daughter’s exam results in math, Moldovan, and English, all of which would determine her further academic opportunities. She also firmly supported her daughter’s desire to play the flute, and Niki made sure that her mother had the necessary money for tuition. Niki was not physically present on a daily basis. However, her daily conversations with her daughter insured that she weighed in on important decisions and was well informed about her daughter’s general well-being. She also invested her energy in encouraging her daughter and reminding her regularly that she had ambitions for her.

In some ways Niki’s nurturing from a distance reflects family forms and practices described for Russia (Rotkirch 2004; Utrata 2011), where daily care of a child is often shared by a mother and a grandmother. However, even though the close communication that Niki maintained with her mother and daughter mirrored such physical proximity, the nurturing practices Niki and Nelli engaged in were more akin to what Collins portrays for “othermothers” (1990, 119–22) among African Americans. In the case of othermothering, mothering is a matter of a relationship built around nurturing and not grounded in direct biology; in fact, when Niki’s daughter referred to her grandmother as “mama” and her mother as “other mother” (drugaia mama), this reflected the degree of relatedness she had with each of them, not the degree of biological closeness. Furthermore, the transnational space through which Niki nurtured, and the importance of communication technologies, introduces another nuance, namely how “othermothering,” where biological mothers take part in mothering but not as a primary, physically present figure, was facilitated. As part of a transnational nurturing nexus of the early twenty-first century, cell phones and Internet technology
have facilitated family forms that enable migrant worker-mothers to maintain meaningful channels of intimacy with their children and other members of their households, while also pursuing their own aspirations for work and travel.

Othermothering as Enabling Migration: Polina

The distinction between “othermothering” and “other mothering” is especially vivid where, for various reasons, women removed themselves from an active role in raising their children. This was the case for Polina, a coworker of Niki’s brother to whom he first introduced me in the summer of 2011 in Istanbul. When we met, Polina was dressed in a black T-shirt and black stretch pants shot through with sparkles and was carrying an array of parcels as gifts for her upcoming visit to her hometown, a Gagauz village in a region of Ukraine bordering Moldova. Later that week Polina invited me to her apartment and over tea told me about her life in Turkey. She explained that she had first come to Istanbul in 1997, when her pay of $60 a week as a shop assistant was more than ten times what she could make at home. She came to Istanbul to escape her abusive husband, whom she had struggled to make peace with for more than ten years.

Polina’s departure was not a sudden one. Each time she clashed with her husband, she took refuge with her sister who advised her to leave for Turkey and promised to help look after Polina’s son. However, Polina was anxious about leaving her fourteen-year-old son of a previous marriage, so she persevered in the relationship. Polina finally decided to take action, applying for and receiving a passport. Her neighbor, who had worked in Turkey for years, offered to help her find work and a place to live, and most important, she promised not to tell her husband where to find her. Polina borrowed money from her sister and traveled by bus from Vulcănești, via Romania and Bulgaria, to Istanbul.

Polina was afraid to return to southern Moldova, but she missed her son, and after eight months she decided to try to work out the relationship with her husband. Although Polina found her son doing well living with her husband—apparently her husband had formed a strong bond with her son from a very young age—she was unable to smooth over her own relationship with her husband. In fact, they fought fiercely soon after her return, and her husband took the opportunity to condemn Polina, calling her a “Turkish whore” (Turetskaia shliukha). Polina said she did not hesitate to pack her bags and return to Turkey, and she did not make another trip home for several years. Her son finished high school but to her disappointment did not go on to higher education. He got married in his early twenties and had two children, but the marriage did not last. At the time of our conversation Polina sent monthly remittances to her ex-daughter-in-law to help support her grandchildren.
Polina’s narrative highlights how othermothering and kinship networks are key to enabling women to become transnational migrants. Polina was able to draw solace from her sister’s promise to look out for her son, and this helped her make a definitive decision to leave for Istanbul. In addition, the fact that her ex-husband got along well with her son made it easier for her to make a new life in Istanbul; in effect, even though Polina could no longer live with her husband, as a dependable caregiver for her son Polina’s ex-husband was also part of a nurturing nexus that made it easier for Polina to pursue migration and remake her life, a life that did not include an active part as an “other mother” raising her teenage son. After working as a shop assistant for a number of years, Polina ultimately fell in love with a Kurdish man with whom she had lived for ten years when I met her.

Histories of Othermothering: Bella

In 2003, shortly after my daughter, stepmother, and I stayed briefly with Bella in her apartment in Vulcănești, Bella departed for work in Russia. I did not see Bella again until 2007, when we sat over dinner in the apartment I was renting in Moscow, and Bella spoke of her life. She shared a vivid and historically grounded account of othermothering as a cultural practice that had long shaped southern Moldova, and she also traced her experience of being a transnational other mother. Bella anchored her account of her family in histories of mobility stretching back more than a century. She described how, in 1880, at the age of five, her Albanian grandmother arrived in the region of contemporary Gagauzia (then Bessarabia) as a refugee fleeing the latest series of wars between the Ottoman and the Russian Empires; since she was without parents, she was taken in by a wealthy merchant family. She was well cared for and ultimately, at the time of her marriage, given land and even a small house. After marrying a local shepherd, she gave birth to seven children—including Bella’s father, who was born in 1912. Bella’s father remained in the region and after going to Albania to earn a degree in Tiraspol, he returned to Bessarabia to become a much-loved teacher of physics and mathematics in the local school. The respect local people had for Bella’s father was significant enough, even as late as the early 1980s, that Bella was given priority over others in the town administration’s allocation of government-owned apartments in the city center of Vulcănești.

The lineage Bella recounted was recognized even though she was, in fact, raised in a different household from her father’s. In a pattern of adoption common to the region but not for girls, at the age of five Bella was sent by her parents to live with one of her father’s brothers. As Elizaveta Kvilinkova writes, historically when a family adopted a child from relatives, the child was most often male and usually ten to twelve years old; frequently children were legally adopted and
would become an heir to the family property, as well as having the responsibility to look after adopted parents in their old age (2007, 221). Bella explained her relatively unusual situation, telling how in her family there were very few children in her generation; three of her father’s sisters did not have any children, while another had a daughter, but she died when an unexploded bomb from the Second World War detonated in the field where she was playing. Her father’s brother, who inherited the family house and the family-run mill from Bella’s grandfather, did not have any children. Bella’s parents tried to send one of their sons to live at the family house and ultimately become the heir to the property. However, the son shied away from the hard work demanded of him and would not stay with Bella’s aunt and uncle. Ultimately, Bella was sent and she settled in, enjoying the love her aunt and uncle lavished upon her.

There were few relatives around the large stone house until the 1970s. Of her father’s siblings, his older brother and sister left for Romania in the brief window of time between the Soviet Union taking over power in the region (1941) and closing the border (1944). Another brother was sent off to Siberia in the late 1930s as the representative of what was viewed as this “kulak” family, considered relatively rich since it owned the single flour mill in the area. Bella’s much older siblings, twins, were toddlers at the time, and they were being cared for by Bella’s mother’s aunt because Bella’s parents were studying in Kishinev. When they heard of the efforts to collectivize property in the region, Bella’s parents traveled home to their village and found their twins in the arms of the aunt, who was sitting at the train station. According to Bella’s account, their house had been taken by the local authorities, and the aunt and children turned out into the street; ultimately, Bella’s aunt and all of her mother’s family were “sent off to Siberia” for being wealthy landowners. Bella’s parents made arrangements for the twins to live with Bella’s father’s family, and then they returned to their studies in Kishinev.

As Bella recounted a life punctuated by the fall and rise of empires, she also portrayed a local pattern of othermothering, wherein it was commonplace for family members other than parents to care for children. Bella told how, after two years of studying engineering (1978–1980), she got pregnant and, after giving birth and taking maternity leave, left her son with her aunt. The same woman who had raised Bella looked after her son so Bella could complete her education. Bella’s aunt was alive until 1991, when she lost her battle with kidney disease, or she might have also cared for Bella’s second son when Bella became a labor migrant several years after his birth.

In 1996 Bella was taking maternity leave from her job to raise her second child. Once her son began day care at two years old, she fully expected to return to her job as an engineer. However, although in the early post-Soviet period some former Soviet maternity benefits continued, by the mid-1990s these benefits had
eroded, and one of the provisions that changed was a guarantee that mothers could return to their jobs after maternity leave. Bella learned that, contrary to her expectations, her job had not been held for her. As she described it:

This was a time of extreme economic hardship, with all kinds of people getting laid off, and it was clear that my only option was to go to Turkey to look for work. I left my sons with my husband and headed for Istanbul. . . . It was easy to find good work; before everyone was going there, you could even choose between jobs. I found work with a family looking after two children for $400/month, and I kept that job, happily working for nine months. I wanted to stay in Istanbul and see the flowers in the spring. I told my husband over the phone and he said, “I’ll give you flowers . . . you better get home!” so I ended up going home. I didn’t really want to leave; that woman was really nice to me, and I got along so well with the kids. The woman was sad to see me leave since she was only able to get out with her husband when I was there to stay with the kids.

In the end, Bella worked in Istanbul off and on for nearly seven years. In 2002 her older son departed from home on a scholarship to study computer programming in Romania, while her younger son went to live with Bella’s brother’s family on the other side of town in Vulcănești; they had two small children, and it was less lonely for Bella’s son than staying alone with his father. As Bella described it, her husband, a local policeman who worked long hours, began drinking in her absence, which made it more difficult for him to provide adequate supervision for their son. Bella returned annually for brief visits to southern Moldova, and in 2003 she left for Moscow. There she worked long days on an apartment renovation crew, and she looked forward to summers when her younger son would travel to Moscow to spend his vacations with her; in this way Bella was also engaging in “other mothering,” while her relatives back in Moldova continued to provide the primary care for her son during the year. After living in Moscow for more than twelve years, in 2016 Bella moved back to Moldova.

Other Mothers and a Transnational Nurturing Nexus

A number of themes weave through the attempts by Raia, Niki, Maria, Polina, and Bella to nurture across borders. The mid- to late 1990s emerge as a traumatic time for families in the region. As the foundations of social stability disappeared almost overnight with the collapse of Soviet state supports, households faced financial crisis. Men were often the first to migrate in search of work on construction brigades in Russia. As in the case of Maria’s first husband, many of
these men did not return, and only after months of receiving no remittances did women learn that their husbands had died in work-related accidents or possibly found lovers. When men were present, like Raia’s and Bella’s husbands, they often sank into heavy alcoholism, and households struggled to stay intact.

In addition to household earnings suffering in this period, the state role in a nurturing nexus also diminished. The maternity benefits that had been in place in most former Soviet and East European countries dwindled in Moldova to levels that were no longer significant to households. As well, the maternity leave benefit, which had ensured one’s place of work would be retained for two to three years (in the 1980s and into the 1990s) was no longer guaranteed in southern Moldova by the late 1990s. Moreover, by the 2000s benefits were paid according to one’s last place of work, with women receiving their full pay for up to four months. However, if there was no last place of work, or if one had been self-employed, women were often ineligible for maternity benefits (Stewart and Huerta 2009, 162).

Othermothering as a local nurturing formation enabling mobility also emerges from these accounts. As Kvilinkova writes about the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “If a child was adopted at an early age by her aunt, then both women (the [biological] mother and the aunt) were called mother” (2007, 221). Like the linguistic practices Collins (1990) alludes to (e.g., “bloodmother” and “othermother”) for diverse African American approaches to nurturing, linguistic practices in Moldova also reflect the othermothering vividly portrayed in women’s accounts. Versions of these practices continue today as transnational worker-mothers, who were often raised by extended families themselves, now arrange for their own children to be cared for by grandmothers, aunts, and close friends.

Particularly Bella’s account—but also Polina’s, Niki’s, Maria’s and Raia’s—reflects how the historical practices of othermothering in southern Moldova made it possible for women to imagine becoming transnational labor migrants. Turning to kin or friends was not framed as a desperate measure but as one that fit within a familiar cultural repertoire. As in Maria’s and Polina’s accounts, when parents or siblings could not care for children, it was not uncommon for women to turn to friends as either primary or assistant caregivers, and grandmothers often readily embraced caregiving as a normal part of the nurturing nexus defining their households. As Eva, who raised her sister Zina’s children in the 1990s, said about her own and Zina’s grandchildren in 2010, “Of course the grandchildren should stay with me so their parents can work more.” In a way, this mirrors a pattern of what Rotkirch has called an “urban-rural nexus” around child care (2004b) that has typified family structures in Russia over the past hundred years, where children are often cared for by grandparents and older relatives in a rural setting,
especially over the summer months, while a younger generation works or studies in cities. Likewise, similar to what Leinaweaver (2010) describes for Peruvian migrants and Chamberlain (2013) for Caribbean-British families, othermothering acts as a distinct caregiving form that is crucial to enabling transnational circuits of mobility between Turkey and Moldova, and sometimes Russia.

The distinctive nurturing nexus of care in southern Moldova goes beyond just familial support and instead consists of historically grounded practices and knowledge (e.g., adoption and expectations of state social support), as well as rapidly changing practices of what some in southern Moldova called “other mothering.” This form of mothering, or nurturing from a distance provided by biological mothers, requires some form of othermothering or daily care and nurturing provided by grandmothers, aunts, and close friends, as well as some government institutions such as day-care centers, but it also increasingly involves biological mothers maintaining close and frequent emotional connections home via phone and Internet technology.

As for African American communities engaged in othermothering, in an era of a devastated local economy and an ineffective state, marginalized southern Moldovan communities have increasingly had to turn to “those you can count on” and rely on networks of kin and friends (Stack 1974, 90–107). Nevertheless, as Nelli’s granddaughter emphasized in calling her mother Niki her “other mother,” in analyzing the shape othermothering takes in Moldova, it is important not to elide the ongoing, nurturing from a distance that “other mothers,” or migrant mothers, also frequently provide.

Local Patterns of Nurturing or Universal Motherhood?

Forms of mothering in Moldova raise important theoretical questions about how families negotiate support for one another, how transnational mobility may shape the ways caregiving is practiced, and how children experience being raised as part of a transnational nurturing nexus. Assumptions around an inalienable mother-child bond and mothering as innate have received extensive critique in recent decades, especially in the wake of Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s (1989) work in shantytowns in Brazil, which destabilized prevalent assumptions about universal forms of “mother love.” However, the phenomenon of migrant mothers prompts a renewed discussion of these ideas. As scholarship critically examines the implications of a globally feminized migrant labor force (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002), a growing volume of research, as well as popular news coverage, has emerged around the way children “left behind” especially suffer (Parreñas 2005; Coomes 2011). Framing analyses in this way reanimates Euro-American popular discourses of the 1970s and 1980s (Glenn 1994) situating biological mothers,
rather than anyone else, as inherently better suited to nurture. The case of southern Moldovan othermothering and transnational nurturing suggests otherwise.

As Henrietta Moore writes, “The concept of ‘mother’ is not merely given in natural processes (pregnancy, birth, lactation, nurturance), but is a cultural construction which different societies build up and elaborate in different ways” (1988, 25). Moore goes on to state that the idea of “mother” is not only established through “maternal love, daily childcare or physical proximity” (1988, 26) but also through long-term material support, frequent communication, and sometimes more infrequent physical proximity but no less significant ties. From the perspective of North America, where the “cult of motherhood” took on new forms in the 1980s (Sanger 1996; Clark 1999), southern Moldovan women’s relative ease with leaving their children for extensive periods might be seen as a conundrum.

It is striking that unlike many of Parreñas’s Filipina respondents, who “sobbed” (2005, 115) during interviews, post-Soviet women did not exhibit this type of affect. Over the many conversations we had about transnational nurturing, unless I specifically prompted Moldovan women migrants, they rarely mentioned that they “missed” (skuchat’) their children or felt guilty about leaving them back home. In reflecting on their migration, older women did tend to emphasize the need to educate their children, and younger mothers would often recount their migration histories and hardships with reference to those who were othermothering children back home. There are several factors that would seem to contribute to the differences in affect that Parreñas and I observed among transnational migrant-mothers. First, young people I met rarely had independent households, and when young women like Niki or Raia gave birth, they most often lived with their mothers. Given that young women’s material and emotional lives were usually closely intertwined with those of their extended family, it makes sense that care for their offspring was also incorporated into this web of relationships and that othermothering became part of the nurturing nexus defining transnational migration. Second, and particularly key to my argument, is the distinctive nurturing nexus in southern Moldova that is inflected by histories of state support, or at least expectations of it, for worker-mothers and historical knowledge of how mothers, grandmothers, and othermothers balanced work and household tasks. In this way, both public discourse and social practice shape how women experience having children raised with othermothers but also the affect women express about others caring for their children. These transnational migrant mothers are “other mothers” who do not necessarily see an inherent conflict between mothering and (transnational) work (see Glenn 1994, 14–16).

Although histories of state support and practices of othermothering mitigate the ways in which women experience these migrations, they do not negate the widespread human suffering brought about by men’s and women’s large-scale
outmigration from home communities. The stories of women labor migrants remind us of the social costs to structural readjustment in marginalized regions like southern Moldova. Especially when households are engaged in a transnational nurturing nexus in raising children, the lack of government support for households places an incredible strain on those upholding the various parts of the caregiving—financial, real time, and virtual. Even in these conditions of material hardship, it is important to avoid assuming universal frameworks around the experience of motherhood and the practices of nurturing and instead to look to the particular contours of transnational nurturing practices. As Raia’s, Maria’s, Niki’s, Polina’s, and Bella’s accounts show, an analysis privileging biological mothers as primary caregivers would misrepresent the diverse other mothering practices interwoven with their transnational mobility. In thinking about the experiences of transnational migrants and their households seeking to forge multilayered forms of care for their children, ideally we can “shift the center,” as Collins writes (1994, 61–62), and be cognizant of the historical continuities and creative measures shaping mobile mothers’ nurturing practices in a world of growing precarity, shrinking government assurances, and increase in women’s transnational mobility.