Articulated Love: Neoliberalism and the Romantic Couple in Popular Culture

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Abstract

Articulated Love surveys the articulations of romantic love and neoliberalism within popular culture from the U.S.A., Canada, and the U.K. [1973-2023]. In the last fifty years, neoliberalism has remade economy, subjectivity, and emotionality, reversing decades of economic redistribution and nearly realizing a truly global capitalism. At different scales, popular culture has both resisted and facilitated such social changes, yet romantic love - with or without marriage - is continuously upheld as a personal solution to the social and economic problems of life under neoliberalism. Deconstructing the determination of our desire by the commodified culture of our contemporary moment, *Articulated Love* approaches music, poetry, cinema, and theoretical writing to argue that our cultural obsession with the romantic couple is a constituent part of the exploitative, oppressive, and dominating social relations inherent to neoliberal capitalism. No exception, romantic relations have been increasingly articulated with capitalism while being upheld as its outside. Disenchanting love's special status, *Articulated Love* grounds its analyses in the cultural rearticulation of those material practices so often subsumed to love's idealistic abstraction. Yet neoliberalism's relation to romance is not simply repressive or instrumentalizing: to the extent that we can improve our competitive positioning by upgrading our existing connections, we go “back on the market,” leveraging our own capital in search of a better love. Attuned to the subtleties of popular culture as they refit normative love to the just-in-time social reproduction or on-demand subject-forming apparatuses of our economy, *Articulated Love* ravels the contradictions and dead-ends of neoliberal romance: its temporality of now and forever, its emotional capacity to induce unwaged work, its ideological separation from economy, its cultural status as an expression of individual agency, and its interpenetration of broad swaths of social life. Within a world where romance is considered mandatory but a living wage is not, where precarity has again become the defining affect of capitalist subjectivity, the loveless subjects of neoliberalism now turn to corporate platforms in search of love. The couple-form becomes an extension -- albeit a tenuous one -- of neoliberal subjectivity, an emphatically non-monetary relation that secures subjective pleasure.

Keywords: neoliberalism; love; cultural studies; popular music; cinema; social reproduction theory

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List of Acronyms

A.I.	Artificial Intelligence
DOMA	Defense of Marriage Act
PRWORA	Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act
sic	sic erat scriptum (Latin: “thus it had been written”)
U.K.	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
U.S.A.	United States of America

Introduction

No social practice or set of relations floats free of the determinate effects of the concrete relations in which they are located.

Stuart Hall - "Problem of Ideology"

Love is not merely an interpersonal event, nor is it merely the site at which politics has its effects, it is a political event.

Elizabeth Povinelli - The Empire of Love

Look for the key to sentiments in social structures.

Pierre Bourdieu - The Rules of Art

In the last fifty years, neoliberalism has remade economy, capitalist subjectivity and emotionality, introducing new contradictions and changed stakes into romantic relationships. Since the 1970s, the abandonment of the social compromises of the postwar "golden age" of industrial capitalism has empowered neoliberal governance to simultaneously intensify economic and social competition: not the conditions for a loving society. As neoliberalism has dissolved the social democratic compromise, decentralized Fordist modes of production, and restructured or simply removed Keynesian redistribution, neoliberal subjects have been pointed not only toward the market but also to the family – the ideological extension of romantic love – to make up the difference. What Marxist-feminists call "the work of love" (Dalla Costa), the unwaged care work whose distribution remains gendered and classed, has been tasked with compensating for declining state support for the necessities of life as inequity mounts. Ideologically and materially, neoliberalism (like Fordism)[1] relies upon the family and its nascent couple-form, socially, politically, and economically. Yet in contexts where marriage rates have continued to decline, and for families riven by national borders or social antagonisms, the family's hegemonic position is being ceded, increasingly, to the romantic couple. At the same time, the material practices of romantic love – from dates to cuddling, from sexuality to emotional support – are now increasingly available (and increasingly socially acceptable) as commodified services. At the same time as neoliberalism reinforces the hetero-normative family structure as civilization's base form, it de-territorializes the emotion's practices, potentially dissociating them from romance through its economizing movements. Truly a time for love!

My dissertation addresses a series of questions regarding romantic love, the couple form, and neoliberalism. Some are primarily concerned with everyday politics, questions whose answers would necessarily motivate future action.[2] How have we become locked into a world where collective change is unimaginable, but the couple is understood as necessary to a full life? Understanding this as a cultural question points

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[1] Keynesianism corresponds to neoliberalism as a mode of governing (from command and control to regulating "the conduct of conduct"); Fordism and post-Fordism as systems of production and consumption; and industrial production (manufacturing) to financialization (rents and fees) as modes of the extraction of surplus value (O'Brien 28). My work approaches neoliberalism within common sense, the result of not only the workings of a "mode of governing" but the distribution of neoliberal ideas and practices across culture.

[2] Like Gayatri Spivak's "aesthetic education," this cultural study of the contemporary "inevitably has a meta-vocational function" (34)

my inquiry toward the vernaculars of romance, and their complex relation to neoliberal common sense. To what extent do the romantic clichés[3] of popular culture refit love for a neoliberal world, one in which "we are always homo oeconomicus" (Brown)? Might the very opposition of love and exchange – "money can't buy me love" – serve as an intimate foundation and emotional justification for economization?[4] Given romance's troubled relation to notions of subjective equality, how do the valorization of competition and normalization of inequality, fundamental to neoliberalism, contour pop culture's depictions of romantic love, including who is a lovable subject? More broadly, to what extent do cultural imaginations of romantic love serve to justify neoliberalization, particularly through the romanticization of financialization, gentrification, and the increasing commodification of social reproduction?

Some of the questions I consider are prompted by theoretical rather than cultural concerns. What is the theoretical relationship between neoliberal subjectivity – one which internalizes inequity through the economization of everything, imagining social relations in terms of markets, consumption, and competition – and a popular culture in which subjects are over-determined toward romantic love? If, as I argue, popular culture deploys romantic love as a personal solution to social problems, how does this articulate with the rhetoric of individual responsibility within neoliberal common sense? The abstraction that is romantic love demands an appropriately multi-faceted study to consider its determinations.

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[3] The word cliché originally referred to a stereotype or other plate used in printing an image (*OED* Noun form "Cliché" 1.). Pressing a wooden engraving into molten metal, a cliché enables the mass production of images in 19th century printing, just as the term's late 19th and early 20th century meaning ("a photographic negative" noun 2.) points toward the ascendance of photography. From the late 19th century, the word takes on its contemporary meaning as "a phrase or expression regarded as original or trite due to overuse. Also as a mass noun" ("cliché'" 3.a). Yet it is in 3b. where the metaphoric circle in complete, as a cliché points toward "a very predictable or unoriginal person or thing; a trite or stereotyped idea of someone or something" (3.b). This progression, from a technology which enables mass production of one medium to the social effects of that technology – the overuse of ready-to-hand notions of people and things made available via mass production – marks the ascent of capitalist manufacturing and its terms' sedimentation within language. A cliché points both toward the industrial production of commodities and their circulation, to the impacts of mass production on subjectivity as well as use-value. They may be trite, but obvious truth is one of the purest forms of common sense.

[4] In this dissertation, I use economization to refer to the re-envisioning of human activity through an economic lens, in the terms of cost-benefit analysis and subjective priorities – unlike monetization, economization short-circuits the capital-money-capital process by locating capital's self-valorizing impulse within the economic subject. My discussion of *homo oeconomicus* and the work of Gary Becker both expand this line of thought later in this introduction.

The terms – romantic love and neoliberalism – prompt more questions and house their own internal contradictions. What to make of the contradictory meanings of romantic love – as fleeting feeling, as authentic action, and/or as objective force? How to approach the immense social weight attached to romance and its cultural ubiquity? To what extent are our imaginations of romantic love – and the practices they home – overdetermined toward the couple? Neoliberalism is itself a contested term in scholarship: is it a historical project to transfer wealth upward (Harvey's "neoliberalization"[5]), a resetting of the art of governance (Foucault), a form of reason that remakes political life (Brown), a historically specific articulation of capitalism (Peck; Hall), a social and economic philosophy turned broadly cultural through its insertion within common sense (Hall; Derksen)? Should the emphasis be on the history of neoliberalism or the logic of its forms of subjection, its quick transfer policies or the modes of feeling it inculcates?

A conservative idea of romance is clearly implicated when neoliberal politicians emphasise the heterosexual family, yet as Jeffrey Weeks argues in *Invented Moralities: Sexual Value in an Age of Uncertainty*, neoliberal policies undercut the basis of such restrictions: "Individual freedom cannot stop at the market; if you have an absolute freedom to buy and sell, there seems to be no logic in blocking your sexual partners, your sexual lifestyle, your identity or your fantasies" (Weeks qtd in Illouz *End of Love* 15). Contradictions between analyses of neoliberal political slogans and neoliberalization in practice are products of the chasm between the capitalist ideology neoliberalism regilds and the capitalist economy neoliberalism reorganizes. In this conceptual swamp, multiple theorizations are plausible. The conceptual relation might be understood as a temporal contradiction between true love's commitment and the affective precarity engendered by the economic system; or, equally, as a synchronization of love's fleeting rhythms with the "just-in-time" social reproduction of our historical moment. As our feelings are increasingly deployed on the logic of investment, where care is relationship currency, the rhythms of romance can be conceived as syncopation for economic subjectivity.

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[5] David Harvey theorizes "neoliberalization" - the late 1970s to 1990s project to apply neoliberal economics in place of the former Keynesian doctrine – as "a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" (Harvey 13).

Credit Love: Re-articulations of Capital and Romance

I spend my tax refund buying you an expensive leather slapper.

I buy panties and flowers, miniskirts and stockings.

I rack up my credit card, I buy a corset.

Wash my slips in white flowers and sugar water.

Show up at your door after your daughter is asleep.

Meet you naked in your twin bed

you bought when you thought you wouldn't have lovers,

your chest's centre

is better than. And I say fuck debt, fuck overdraft

fuck 13.9% interest and my FICO score,

let's buy $150 of fruit at berkeley bowl.

let's buy out the taco truck

bounce the rent cheque.

You are better and more important than what

I'll owe Mastercard when I die.

"We're Overdrawn and In Love," Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

You could plan a good life of property ownership, marriage, and class ascendancy, building your credit and connections to make your domestic dreams come true. Or, like the lyric subject[6] of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's poem "We're Overdrawn and In Love" [2011], you could throw all your capital into love and pleasure, rejecting capital's promises of future plenitude – and racking up a lifetime of debt. Credit gives access to the pleasures of wealth: fancy bread and roses rather than rent. While

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[6] Subjection to overlapping, complementary, or conflicting configurations of power and property is one heart of the contradictions I explore in this introduction. In "The Subject and Power," an afterword to *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Foucault defines "subject" in such a way as to synthesise meanings: "There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" (212).

this taps into the precarity of contemporary life, it sets that precarity within a world in which opulent pleasure is readily available for those who have the money.

Queering a masculine proliferation of seduction poems – one that includes John Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" [1648], Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" [1681], and songs such as Bruce Springsteen's "4th of July Asbury Park (Sandy)" [1973] – the lyric subject of this poem prioritizes the desire, plenitude, and gratification *of their beloved* instead of themselves. In the poem's final two lines the beloved is valued above the abstractions of capital and capitalist futurity when they insist "You are better and more important than what / I'll owe Mastercard when I die" (50). In the poem's consumerist *carpe noctem* it is not only the lyric subject's own capital that will be exchanged for the tools and ingredients of romantic pleasure, but their credit rating: capitalist abstraction gone visceral. The beloved whom the lyric subject addresses is not a young lover, but an old one, and while this is a love poem, it is also an after-the-end-of-love poem; its present-tense is a return to romantic fantasy rather than its inauguration. If neoliberal romance has a temporality built into its "structure of feeling" (Williams), it is this one: love as a life-long project of seizing the moment.

Where the seduction poems present a lyric subject appealing for love and pleasure against dominant sexual mores and situate their feminized beloveds as the object of pursuit, the lyric subject of "We're Overdrawn and In Love" is both assertive and giving, asking nothing of the beloved. Well, they ask almost nothing: just seize the moment and mortgage the future. The poem's lyric subject knows the liquidity of capital, and enthusiastically exchanges economic power for mutual pleasure: "fuck 13.9% interest and my FICO score / let's buy $150 of fruit at berkeley bowl." Yet this is not solely consumption of services and commodities: each commodity is thickly imbricated with the sexual, gastronomic, and aesthetic pleasures that the lyric subject plans for their beloved. Is this a love song to consumption? Piepzna-Samarasinha's lyric subject is certainly seizing the means of consumption – "buy," "bought," and "spend" occur six times in 15 lines. Despite this, the lyric subject rejects the subjectifying abstractions of capital: debt generally, interest rates, credit ratings, and money are all thrown away in pursuit of love. "We're Overdrawn and in Love" suggests a contradictory relation between romantic and economic subjectivity. Perhaps, as "We're Overdrawn and In Love" suggests, it is a subjection to capitalist governance that inhibits romantic subjectivity; yet, equally, the pleasures made possible by capitalist consumption are

undeniably romantic. While the consumerist fantasy is pleasurable, debt has its hold on the subject.

The poetic form already hints at the economic governance of pleasure under neoliberalism: the poem would not need to be a fantasy if its subject were rich. None of the items listed are rare, just expensive, though the effort the lyric subject takes on behalf of the couple's pleasure suggests this is no facile affair. Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's poem evokes the consumerist and romantic pleasures of "the good life," and its lyric subject claims those pleasures for themselves and their lover. The celebration of romantic love does not reinforce neoliberal subjectivity, tied in as it is with financialization and debt. Rather, abandoning the temporality of class ascendency is the cost of self-abandonment in romance. Yet by placing interest and credit in relation to consumptions both economic and dietary, the poem brings the fleshy moments of love into intimate relation to capital's circuits. As Sianne Ngai summarizes in "Visceral Abstractions,"[7] exchange and production are integrated in capitalism, but this poem abandons an interest in the production process – of the employment of fixed capital in a process of capital's self-valorization – to produce pleasure for the beloved, so capital is wound into the sexual, romantic, and gastronomic life of the lyric subject. The poem's language is not explicit in this; rather, the link between capitalist abstraction and the embodied pleasure of the subject and their beloved is secured by amorous commodities, cinching love to consumption.

"We're Overdrawn and in Love" evokes a tradition of cultural production upholding the value of romance over money, epitomized in The Beatles' hit "Can't Buy Me Love." When Paul McCartney pleads for a lover to "tell me that you want the kind of things that money just can't buy," he is not only trying to keep his cash, he is reiterating the practice of an economic philosophy that separates love from exchange. The song recognizes that this is a cultural sentiment, common sense: "can't buy me love / everybody tells me so." The song lifts love beyond exchange, an exception to the money-form's universal equivalence: "I don't care too much for money / money can't buy

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[7] "What makes capitalism distinctive is its historically unprecedented integration of production and circulation— starting from the worker's 'free' exchange of her labor-power as a commodity, production and exchange mediate each other at every point—the two spheres can often appear autonomous, even to extremely perceptive and dedicated analysts of the system" (53). "Visceral Abstractions," *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 21:1. 2015.

me love."[8] For pop star Lady Gaga even a "Bad Romance" features this separation from exchange, which includes direct transactions between lovers: "I want your everything as long as it's free / I want your love."[9] But to insist upon the split between love and the market suggests the extent to which desire, affection, and care are already mediated by exchange.

A cultural study of the vernacular of romantic love contributes to grasping the relationship between everyday activity and the seemingly disconnected structures of governance within contemporary neoliberalism.[10] Like Stacy Denton, I am concerned with disenchanting the common sense conception of love "as existing outside the social realities of a given time and place" (Denton 19) by situating our idealizations within the dusty material, subjecting our abstractions to an examination of their concrete determinations. Yet the relation between neoliberalism and love is not fixed: just as love, when romantically determined, can justify a normative model of social reproduction based on the oppression of women (e.g. the Fordist family), so too has love beyond the couple been used as a rallying cry for a politics based on community care. As I explore in my conclusion, theorists of emotion and politics cast a dubious eye on the potential of love as a signifier around which revolutionary impulses might constellate.

Crucial to my argument is the distinction of affect and emotion. Affect – as intensity, raw electro-chemical data, the shiver or blush before they are interpreted as such – contrasts with the way that emotion brings affect to social forms. Theorizing emotion's relation to affect in "The Autonomy of Affect," Brian Massumi captures the interplay between meaning-making and feeling:

> An emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed

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[8]Beatles, The. "Can't Buy Me Love." *A Hard Day's Night*, United Artists Records. 1964.

[9] Lady Gaga. "Bad Romance." *The Fame Monster*. Interscope Records. 2009.

[10] Lawrence Grossberg put the task of cultural studies succinctly when he insisted: "Cultural studies is concerned with describing and intervening in the ways discourses are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the relations between people's everyday lives and the structures of the social formation so as to reproduce, resist, and transform the existing structures of power" (22). "The Scandal of Cultural Studies,' *It's A Sin: Essays on Postmodernism, Politics, and Culture*

> progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized (Massumi 88).

Romantic love exemplifies emotion in this regard. Yet by hegemonizing multiple positive affects under one signifier romantic love operates as a personal hermeneutic that links our good feelings to the couple. The couple-form is a patterning of human intimacy; not "the natural expression of desire" (as Laura Kipnis insists in *Against Love*) but a cultural, political, social, and economic form.

I am led to this conclusion by theorizing emotion as an articulation of sensation to social relationship, a common sense epistemology of feeling. Reifying the immediacy of a blush, flush, or butterflies, and orienting those feelings toward the beloved, romantic love – like other emotions – unboxes the momentary within the house of the epochal. Felicity Amaya Schaeffer suggests both romance's inoculation from social criticism and its social value: "Love, like affect more broadly, is imagined as pure action, as the site of true subjectivity before language, social dictates, or reason, and is thus seen as representative of the authentic self" (47).[11] Schaeffer's phrasing is telling: by treating the *emotion* of love as if it were an *affect*, the cultural mediation of feeling is naturalized, imagined as pre-social. Love's free action (free because its mediation has been repressed) becomes social, economic, and political form (which is naturalized as an extension of the freedom of love).

As I consider through Haddaway's "What Is Love?" [1993], this stitching of moment to eternity equips romantic lovers with an intention toward social form; romance demands the gaze of the other to validate its subject. This trajectory, timeline, escalator, arc, or orbit of the romantic couple is not only grounded in feeling, it is sustained by the quasi-magical character of romantic love within liberalism. As I discuss through the work of Elizabeth Povinelli, falling in love is an "event," one which is not only constituted retroactively, but which has its fictions validated in the political form of the couple. Yet the question of agency – freedom, subjectivity, choice – is haunted in love, where the contradictions of sovereign individuality are stretched beyond containment by the non-agentic character of feeling. The couple thus evinces a kind of reification: the "intimate event" of love, retroactively conceived as Povinelli argues, catalyzes a series of social

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[11] *Love and Empire: Cybermarriage and Citizenship Across the Americas*. Schaeffer questions this conception extensively while locating it as the normative understanding deployed by the U.S.A. when the State considers immigration and marriage.

processes (dating, marriage, child-rearing) that both legitimate it and propel it along the trajectory of normative intimacy.[12]

As I suggest throughout the dissertation, it is the articulation of affect to form (through emotion) that points toward the economic determinations of love, its necessity for the reproduction of capitalism and its normative subjects. I am following Stuart Hall's usage of articulation, whose explanation is illuminating:

> By the term, "articulation," I mean a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not "eternal" but has constantly to be renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections—re-articulations—being forged. It is also important that an articulation between different practices does not mean that they become identical or that the one is dissolved into the other. Each retains its distinct determinations and conditions of existence. However, once an articulation is made, the two practices can function together, not as an "immediate identity" (in the language of Marx's "1857 Introduction") but as "distinctions within a unity." (Hall, "Signification" 113-4)

The feeling and the form do not collapse into one another, but as the cultural production I consider demonstrates, they both function and move together. Hall developed articulation theory to think about the State, particularly how:

> a range of political discourses and social practices which are concerned at different sites with the transmission and transformation of power— some of those practices having little to do with the political domain as such, being concerned with other domains . . . are nevertheless articulated to the State, for example familial life, civil society, gender and economic relations (Hall "Signification" 93).

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[12] Amy Gahran's *Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator: Uncommon Love and Life* captures the temporality of the romantic couple in its critique of normative love. Note the proximity of these expectations to the fantasy of the good life, and the integration of the social value with capitalist and state subjectivity, as "the relationship escalator" is conceived as: "The default set of societal expectations for intimate relationships. Partners follow a progressive set of steps, each with visible markers, toward a clear goal. The goal at the top of the Escalator is to achieve a permanently monogamous (sexually and romantically exclusive between two people), cohabitating marriage — legally sanctioned if possible. In many cases, buying a house and having kids is also part of the goal. Partners are expected to remain together at the top of the Escalator until death. The Escalator is the standard by which most people gauge whether a developing intimate relationship is significant, 'serious,' good, healthy, committed or worth pursuing or continuing."

Romantic love runs through each of these, yet there is no sense in which romantic love could be considered a unifying logic for these disparate practices. As Ernst Laclau and Chantal Mouffe write in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, articulation is a situation in which "unity between agents is not the expression of a common underlying essence but the result of a political construction and struggle" (Laclau and Mouffe 55); an articulation is contingent and external to the fragments it articulates, unlike a mediation in which fragments and their organization are necessary moments of a totality which transcends them (Laclau and Mouffe 80). Thinking with these terms means approaching the link between affect and couple as contingent, examining the conditions and cultural moves whereby that link is naturalized, noticing those points where the two disarticulate, and, crucially, what stakes the re-articulations of neoliberalism have brought to romantic relations. Yet it also means approaching romantic practices as simultaneously participating in multiple levels of life: social, economic, cultural, and political.

Romantic love's historical imbrication with capitalist modes of production and social reproduction (exemplified in the Fordist family) that makes such a study necessary; the dialectical relation between those processes necessitate romantic changes. Neoliberalism has not disentangled production from reproduction; instead, we are encouraged to seek temporary employment on the model of serial monogamy (Kathi Weeks 49). But serializing monogamy is also a "pressure valve," to use Kipnis' term, a way to "individualize" the failings of a system (176). Which system is failing – the couple or neoliberal capitalism? Yet the realm of romance is culturally mediated, and so there are no guarantees. This introduction begins to think the relations – too much for a PhD dissertation to comprehensively address – between romantic love as an emotion whose vernacular establishes a temporal correspondence between affect and the form of the romantic couple; and neoliberalism as a pervasive mode of capitalist governance whose economic and philosophical assumptions have remade capitalist economy and have been broadly deposited into common sense.

In this study I have tried to constellate works that address specific theoretical problems, those knots of feeling, culture, and economy that illustrate the contradictory raveling of romantic love and neoliberalism. Particularly, I have tried to highlight culture that reworks romantic love in relation to the economic changes of the past 50 years: not simply to position them as resistant to or complicit with neoliberalism, but to understand how contemporary romantic practices are contoured by and articulate with the

rearrangement of global capitalism that continues to subordinate life to capital's self-valorization. From the love songs of the 1980s that capture the collapse of Fordist ideologies of family in their romantic fantasies, to 2010s movies that deploy neoliberal subjectivity in the form of romantic artificial intelligences, seemingly disparate cultural works highlight the breadth and depth of neoliberalism's saturation of romantic common sense.

The remainder of this introduction presents my argument, beginning with an overview of romantic love's internal semantic contradictions. I demonstrate that the incoherences of romantic love are crucial to both the subjective priority afforded to the emotion within contemporary culture and the operation of the couple as a political, economic, and social form. Theorizing the emotion of romantic love as an articulation of feeling to form, I then show how neoliberalism intervenes in the correspondence between romantic love and the couple by remaking family, subjectivity, and emotionality. As the normative catalyst for marriage, I connect research on the neoliberalization of family – the couple's extended form – to show neoliberal policy's enmeshment and tension with romantic common sense. I conclude with summaries of the succeeding chapters, which explore mutations and impasses in neoliberal common sense as staged in popular culture. Beginning with a musical exploration of de-industrialization and changes in the structure of family in the 1980s, jumping to the cinematic dystopia of mandatory coupling in the 2010s, and concluding with an exploration of the commodification of romance in the form of Romantic "A.I." in the early 2020s, the cultural works I consider demonstrate the imbrication of capitalist governance with our most intimate practices of desire and care.

One crucial aspect to this is romantic love's imbrication with work – both unwaged and "done out of love" but, also increasingly as proof of loving one's job – which exacerbates existing social inequities already wound into society, notably racism and sexism. Now, not only does the "ideology" of romantic love continue to justify the patriarchal distribution of unwaged work (particularly domestic work, as Marxist-feminists have argued for decades) and to concentrate capital (through normative romantic relations, inheritance law, and representations of who is a lovable subject) but

neoliberalization has *also* meant generalizing our expectations of romantic love *outside the space of the home,* to our relationships with work itself.[13]

In “Down with Love: Feminist Critique and the New Ideologies of Work” (2017), Kathi Weeks affirms that the critiques of the 1970s Marxist-feminists succeeded in “showing the family as connected to rather than the antithesis of work” (Weeks 38). Despite this, the ideology of romantic love continues to be deployed to coerce unwaged work in the name of a “deeply individuated conception of love [which] resonates powerfully with the neoliberal ideal of the entrepreneurial subject” (Weeks 47). At the same time, contemporary workplaces now demand love for one’s waged work.[14] Weeks argues that “the popular literature on love and happiness at work prescribes a certain subjective orientation to waged work” rather than a set of ideas, making subjects responsible for their own emotions. A strategy “business leaders” have taken is to reform work *on the basis of love*.[15] In so doing, the economic system articulates our innermost feelings with the processes by which value is produced, making our love the vehicle of our own exploitation. Unlike other ideological formations, like the work ethic alone, love comes pre-packed with a neoliberal critique, since it presents our relations as decidedly non-economic and therefore dismisses, in advance, an economic calculus that might point to its ideological character: why try to put a price on love? In effect, love is supposed to “tap into what is imagined as a vast reservoir of will and energy and as the

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[13] Weeks: “Under heteropatriarchal capitalism, the ideology of romantic love born of the separate spheres, an idealized and feminized model of love, is being harnessed, not only to continue to assign domestic work to women, but to recruit all waged workers into a more intimate relationship with waged work.” (Weeks 40).

[14] Miya Tokumitsu argues in “In the Name of Love” that, for all workers, it has now become imperative to “do what you love.” Ironically, the demand to do lovable work (Tokumitsu highlights graphic design and other professionalized jobs, Steve Jobs as ideal) creates an aversion to what used to be called the work of love, which becomes unlovable work (e.g. washing diapers). Tokumitsu critically analyses this “mantra for today's worker,” concluding that it is “the most perfect ideological tool of capitalism” because it “shunts aside the labor of others and disguises our own labor to ourselves” just as houseworkers are told their work is not work.

[15] The Amazon.com promotional blurb for one of *Forbes*’ “Top Ten Creative Leadership Books of 2015” reads: “Against the backdrop of eroding trust in capitalism, pervasive technology, big data, and the desire to quantify all of our behaviours, *The Business Romantic* makes a compelling case that we must meld the pursuit of success and achievement with romance if we want to create an economy that serves our entire selves.”The “Business Romantic Society” that the author of this text created advertises “a unique space to create positive visions for technology and humanity in a playful and intimate setting, and to prototype the human future of work.”(https://thebusinessromanticsociety.com/).

handle that employers can use to leverage that energy into productive activity" (Weeks 41). With apologies to Huey Lewis and the News, that's the labour-power of love.

Demands of love's surplus pressurize it. That is, while neoliberals tout the power of love and family, the policies of neoliberalism have poisoned the well from which their ideologues draw by eviscerating the material bases of social belonging. For neoliberal subjectivity, however, the emphatically non-commodifiable character of romantic love contrasts with the commodification of romantic practices through goods and services, and more insidiously, the economization of romantic relations under neoliberalism. The romantic couple is, for many neoliberal subjects, the most valued political relation: it forms the framework for fantasies of a better life in the wake of collective political disappointment. Yet love is depoliticized as personal. The necessity of social reproduction and its ideological articulation with romantic relations form a large part of romantic love's contradictory status as both the one thing worth living for and a miserable dead-end for so many people. I consider how the economic shifts of the past 50 years have contributed to this socio-cultural situation.

Love is paradoxical for neoliberal subjects who imagine it as impossible to calculate, yet neoliberal emotionality renders feeling the object of calculation and reflection, utility and modification. By insisting on the emotional autonomy of its subjects, neoliberalism simultaneously opens what romance can mean and stigmatizes subjects for their lack of love. To be sure, this grows out of what Friedrich Engels' O*rigin of the State, Family, and Private Property* wryly observes of 19th century liberalism: "Marriage, according to the bourgeois conception, was a contract, a legal transaction, and the most important one of all, because it disposed of two human beings, body and mind, for life" (Engels, 70-1). Yet the formation of romantic relations has also changed, as Eva Illouz demonstrates in *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations*, from a patriarchal courtship system to a romantic market, bringing massive uncertainties to romantic subjects[16]. To the extent that we can improve our competitive positioning by upgrading

[16] "It has not sufficiently been noticed that the passage from traditional romance to the sexual order that followed the 1970s was the shift from courtship as the prevailing mode of interaction between men and women to an order in which rules of engagement changed entirely, becoming fuzzy and uncertain and, at the same time, closely regulated by an ethics of consent." (Illouz *End of Love* 30)

our existing connections, we go “back on the market,”[17] leveraging our own capital in search of a better love. The serialization of monogamy, and the restructuring of sexuality along the lines of short-term gratification rather than long-term commitment introduces a misfire into the articulation of romantic love with marriage that capitalism has relied upon – albeit unevenly – for the social reproduction[18] of labour-power.

This does not stop romantic love; instead, it creates demand for romantic commodities: the neoliberal subject turns to the market to renew their subjectivity, rendering romantic love a life-long pursuit that articulates with consumption and secures social reproduction. Neoliberalism’s expansion of economic subjectivity has prompted a new rift of contradictory motivations at the heart of capitalist subjectivity. As ideal or unique experience hypostasized in a particular form, romantic love articulates with the rhythms of consumption; love is the ultimate surplus, an unreachable end implicitly proximate to consumption, or a virtuous impulse to which nearly any commodifying operation can attach. Everything except love can be bought, even the constituent activities of love.

In this, discourses of romantic love work to normatively construct and commodify desire – not only toward a monogamous sexual relationship and cohabitation, but also by defining “romance” in the terms of dates, gifts, travel, and other acts of conspicuous consumption. There are entire industries that sell romance, and more still that sell products “in the name of love” (Schaeffer). But this is deeper than buying commodities because they induce what Illouz refers to in *The End of Love* as “sexy atmospheres” (51) or, as in the tradition of working-class romance “We’re Overdrawn and In Love” evokes,

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[17] In 2011, walking along a footpath from the town of Canterbury to the University of Kent, a friend of mine used this phrase to describe her excitement at being single after a few months in a monogamous relationship.

[18] Cinzia Arruzza in “Remarks on Gender” provides this useful summary of social reproduction and its development: “The term social reproduction, in the Marxist tradition, usually indicates the process of reproduction of a society in its totality … In the feminist Marxist tradition, however, social reproduction means something more precise: the maintenance and reproduction of life, at the daily or generational level. In this context, social reproduction designates the way in which the physical, emotional, and mental labor necessary for the production of the population is socially organized: for example, food preparation, youth education, care for the elderly and the sick, as well as questions of housing and all the way to questions of sexuality.” See Cindi Katz's “Vagabond Capitalism and the Necessity of Social Reproduction” or Silvia Federici's *Revolution at Point Zero* or the collection of essays *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* edited by Tithi Bhattacharya for more on the importance of social reproduction theory to the analysis of contemporary capitalism.

because expending capital proves our commitment to love over money. For neoliberal subjects, the market becomes a commonsense model for all aspects of life (even if this model is incoherent, absurd, or impracticable), while romantic love is imagined as freely given. Love thus becomes the object of a contradictory calculation: what must I do to get someone to freely give me their love?

Contradictions of Feeling and Form: Semantics, Sex, and Care

Lauren Berlant refers to "a huge dust ball" of conceptual baggage that love "ports" with it[19], suggesting that any theorization of neoliberalism and romantic love must attend to the baggage and internal contradictions of romantic love. Love's definitions and accompanying phrases in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* [2008] sprawl across 76 pages, evincing what Berlant calls "an anxiety to define" that is one dynamic prompted by concern with love (683). Many of these contemporary usages are explicitly romantic, including "Love" as a personification of an objective force – Cupid, Eros, Venus, or Amor – though its usages have waned in recent decades (1.7.a). Of the verb forms, the transitive marked at 1.a. is defined as "to entertain a great affection, fondness, or regard for" but is "distinguished from sexual love" at 1.b. There, "to feel sexual love for (a person); to be in love with" feels like a variation of the first entry, as if love + sex = romantic love. Supporting this view, a noun form entry for love designates "An intense feeling of romantic attachment based on an attraction felt by one person for another; intense liking and concern for another person, typically combined with sexual passion," (I.4a) which is linked to "an instance of being in love" or "in plural: love affairs, amatory relations" (at 1.4.b). One's love may not only be a feeling, or a relation, but the object of these: "a person who is beloved of another, esp. a sweetheart" (1.6.a), hinting at the importance of the beloved to the emotion itself. When the term "romantic" is defined as an adjective modifying "love or friendship" it is not explicitly sexual, but "of an idealized kind" or "relating to (esp. idealized or sentimental) love" which is explicitly *emotional* and contrasts with "physical or sexual aspects" of a relationship ("romantic" 5.a). Yet these usages are often synthesised, for example in the double-entendre "to make love" (I.5 and P.3.a) which illustrates the sex-love complex around which contemporary romantic

[19]"A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages"

love is oriented. For asexual persons who are also romantic, distinguishing these two elements of love is crucial to identification as well as recognition,[20] yet prising them apart entails changing cultural assumptions as well as legal and economic frameworks. Berlant reaches an open proposition with the temporality of love left indefinite, without relying on sexual desire: "I propose love to involve a rhythm of ambition and a desire to stay in sync, which is a lower bar than staying attuned, but still hard and awkward enough" (Berlant 683). Here, the temporality of love is not linked to forever, but rather to presence distributed over time – will and futurity, however irregular.

Sought, valued, but famously semantically slippery, romantic love can be an expression of feeling ("I love you") or a state ("I am / we are in love"). The feeling is both chaotic and predictable, riven by cliché and imagined as uniquely personal, while the state of being in love signals, if not inaugurates, the couple form. Affirming the semantic complexity of love, Sarah Schaefer's "complex keyword" definition from *Critical Quarterly* highlights love's "increasingly widening meaning" as objects of love and modes of loving continue to proliferate (97). Referring separately to sexual and romantic usages of love, she insists that "romantic love" implies sexual desire but cannot be reduced to it. Yet, despite the term's semantic promiscuity, Schaefer notes that love retains a "curious ability to maintain emotional gravity" (97). Schaefer attributes this to the word's linguistic

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[20] While this dissertation cannot fully address asexual romance, the emergence of asexual identity challenges the understanding of romantic love as a sex-love complex, since the distinction between romance and sex is crucial to asexual identification. As Elizabeth F. Emens' "Compulsory Sexuality" shows, there is a slowly expanding legal recognition of asexual orientation, but despite the shifts (exemplified by Emens by asexuality's status as a protected category within New York state anti-discrimination law) Emens shows the law of the U.S.A. to be "sexual law" and society as "sexusociety." That is, from legal enforcement to social norms, sexuality is expected as a condition of contemporary subjectivity in the U.S.A. (and this is certainly the case elsewhere, as well). The Asexual Visibility and Education Network defines asexuality as "an orientation, not an ideology. Asexual people can have a wide variety of attitudes towards sex, both in a wider cultural sense and in personal relationships. Some asexual people may have an openly accepting attitude towards sex in society at large while not being open to having sex themselves. Conversely, some asexual people may hold conservative attitudes towards sex in broader cultural contexts, while being open to compromise within a relationship. These attitudes come in all combinations." (n.p.) Romantic love, for asexuals, is not necessarily above sexuality (as in the Christian ideal of chaste affection or detachment from the fallen body captured in vows of abstinence) but is distinct from it. For Carter Vance, however, asexuality is not simply dialogically opposed to normative "allosexual" identity. Rather, asexuality is "a historically structured and contingent emergence of a particular moment in neoliberal capitalism" that "can be used as a positional tool in order to illuminate the totality of sexuality as a reified and commodified entity" (Vance 133). If romantic love is expected to secure the commodity of sexuality in the body of the beloved, its relation to neoliberal subjectivity seems straightforwardly complementary.

stability – contrasted with its semantic expansion – since its introduction in Old English. While the contemporary term is associated with courtly love traditions, Schaefer suggests that this root of romantic love in codes of chivalry and tales of gallantry is less helpful for comprehending the contemporary meaning; yet it does point to a historical context for love's contradiction between a sentimental ideal love and a lustful sensuous kind[21]. If romantic love is a vague signifier, it is nevertheless unambiguously meaningful, and if the ideal and sensuous elements of love are distinguished in their definitions, they nevertheless articulate together in the term's vernacular usage. Suggestively, each *OED* definition of romantic love and its attendant terms – with the rule-confirming exception of "love affairs" and their association with infidelity – situates romantic love within a dyad, oriented toward a singular other, the beloved.

The indefatigable Haddaway's[22] hit single "What is Love?[23]" illustrates not only the presumed fruitlessness of a search for a meaning of love, but also the pain of unrequited love. The song's series of appeals to the lover begin with the song's immortal hook: "What is love? / Baby don't hurt me / Don't hurt me, no more." The impotent persistence of rationality in conflict with embodied visceral desire drives the beat, where the lyric subject's uncertainty links an epistemic problem – "the age-old question" of the song's title – to the pain of love. Like Joan Jett and the Blackhearts' "Love Is Pain" the life-long temporality of this question sounds out as repetition. Questioning love follows from a lack of emotional reciprocity: "I don't know why you're not there / I give you my love / But you don't care." This dependence on the lover is a transformation, a merging

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[21] "What we might today call 'romantic love' also emerged in oE, though it should be noted that this sense has a complicated history connected to courtly love conventions (centred in the unattainability of love or with the object of love as a distant but desirable ideal) and is therefore more modern, as D.H. Lawrence might have claimed, than its *OED* entry suggests" (Schaefer 97).

[22]Born Nestor Alexander Haddaway, Port of Spain, 1965.

[23] "What Is Love?" – lyrics by Haddaway, melody by Dee Dee Halligan (Dieter Lunstedt a.k.a. Tony Hendrik) and Junior Torello (Karin Hartmann-Eisenblatter a.k.a. Harin van Haaren) - was #1 on weekly charts in 15 countries from 1993-4. The lasting appeal of this song has matched its initial appeal: Insider listed it as one of "The 57 Best one-hit wonders of all time" (2019), while Paste listed "What Is Love?" as #6 on its list of one-hit wonders of the 90s. Elle rated it #39 in "52 Best 1990s Pop Songs" (2019), Buzzfeed rated it #11 out of all 1990s dance songs, and Australia's Max listed it #189 of "1000 Greatest Songs of All Time." *Saturday Night Live* included it as the theme song of the "Roxbury Guys" sketches that evolved into the film *A Night at the Roxbury* (1998), while the video game *Saints Row IV* (2013) and the blockbuster film *Black Panther* (2018) both feature the song in prominent scenes. Eminem's 4x platinum single "No Love," featuring Lil' Wayne (2010) employs a sample of the track in its self-aggrandizing – and more than casually misogynist – dismissal of the pair's critics.

of identity, but it also sets the couple apart from others ("I know we're one / just me and you"). The link between the lovers is not momentary, but epochal, and this becomes a kind of call to action ("this is our life / our time") projected forward into eternity ("When we are together / I need you forever"). The apostrophe – Haddaway's lover is absent – makes a reply impossible and leaves an uncertainty that troubles the confidence of earlier statements: "Is this love?"[24]

Haddaway can hardly be blamed for not answering "the age-old question" in the lyrics of a dance track, but he has said in interviews since that the song was meant to communicate a conception of love as "unique and individual", something that each person must define for themselves[25]. The ambiguity leaves a subject searching, a search for meaning which is found the actualization of love: the beloved, romantic subject's defining source of recognition and subjection. This is the subjective definition of love, an openness that avoids essentializing the *content* of love by essentializing the *source* of love and thereby ignores the way love is mediated. In romance's normative vernacular, though, this free action naturally leads to the form of the couple. One can "be in love" without that love being reciprocated, but unrequited love is normatively considered a personal misery (if a bittersweet one); the couple is central to both the social value of romantic love *and* the duration of romantic feeling. Haddaway clearly articulates the lyric subject's desire to the form of the monogamous romantic couple, and indeed that desire can only be met within the couple: "I want no other / no other lover / I can't go on." Haddaway's lyric subject is defeated by the lack of reciprocity: so much for

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[24] The music video, directed by Volker Hannwacker, provides a campy, sinister, and thoroughly sexualized alternative reading by depicting Haddaway's transformation from innocent suitor to sensuous vampire. The home of this cult of pain and love is an English castle full of art, beautiful objects, and vampiric women, where romantic and gothic aesthetics play off each other to highlight sexuality's imbrication with power. Art objects serve, momentarily, as a stand-in for the lover when Haddaway holds up a marble bust, addressing it as a visualization of the lyric's apostrophe, but the central focus for Haddaway's character in the video is a vampire (actor uncredited). This visual resetting of the lyrics' object of love implies that Haddaway's pain is intentional; it takes the lack of reciprocity referred to in the lyrics as a sadistic act. Represented at once are subjection to love and subjectivity in love, with the question "What is Love?" taking on a pointed and critical aspect: what if my lover is doing this to me intentionally? Worth mentioning is that nowhere in the song do we get an indication of the lover's ongoing interest: one wonders if love as an extension of subjective will is predisposed toward entitlement.

[25] In an email to New York based online culture magazine *Flavorwire*, Haddaway also provided his personal associations with love: "For me, it has to do with trust, honesty, and dedication" (Mapes, n.p.).

eternity! Yet the beat continues, affect persisting beyond the duration of enquiry and couple.

As a fusion of sexual desire and enduring fondness, Haddaway stages an internal temporal contradiction of romantic love: the feeling is fleeting, but it catalyzes long-term commitment. The Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band song “4th of July Asbury Park (Sandy)” illustrates this traditional romantic temporality and renders its contradictory logic perceptible at the moment of its waning. The lyric subject of the song is both newly single and newly unemployed, and the song is delivered as an attempt to seduce the titular Sandy before he leaves the boardwalk scene that has been their common world. The date of the song’s title is significant, not only because “Independence Day” in the United States is refigured as a symbol of freedom from the restrictions of employment and patriarchy, but also because the lyrical appeal is grounded in a conception of love as freedom.

Each chorus elaborates a different aspect of romantic love in ways that illustrate its internal temporal dynamics. At first, the appeal is framed as a one-time possibility within a world where the future is uncertain: “Oh, love me tonight, for I may never see you again.” The double meaning of love – as pure action and as a euphemism for sexual intercourse – is splayed across both uses of the term in this song as love’s action is realized in sex without guarantees. The lyrical uncertainty here signifies not only the economic and social upheavals of the early 1970s – what the song captures in its tale of a changing boardwalk culture – but also personal freedom from the strictures of marriage (or any other closed future). But the song develops out of that *carpe noctem* an enduring appeal, first perceptible when the subject implies that Sandy leave town with him: “For me this boardwalk life is through, babe / you ought to quit this scene too.” In typical trajectory, love amplifies until the pure action of the first chorus evolves in the final chorus to a promise of futurity for the couple, a kind of now-for-future exchange: “Oh, love me tonight and I promise I’ll love you forever.” While there is some ambiguity here – the potential of imminent departure might signal only a distant regard, though it also suggests a romantic escape – the temporality mapped out by Springsteen matches that of the couple and marriage. Both lyric subjects orient their desires – felt in the moment – to fantasies of eternal love within the couple.

Love's semantic multiplicity obscures a strangely homogeneous form. Validating Haddaway's eternal query, and the form it seems to fix upon, historian Sarah Pinto's "Researching Romantic Love," an interdisciplinary study into romantic love, found the term's usages in scholarship so contradictory as to be incoherent. She argues that this incoherence is "constitutive" of the term, concluding:

> "The scholarships of romantic love suggest, however, that the romantic loving couple is in fact romantic love's only defining property. The love of this couple may or may not be exclusive, specific, universal, or emancipatory, but its existence – whether real or imagined – is romantic love's precondition" (580).

The conclusion Pinto reaches – which might also be understood as a methodological turn away from emotion and its entanglement with subjectivity and toward social form – is also one suggested by Illouz, in different terms:

> Far from being presocial or precultural, emotions are cultural meanings and social relationships that are closely and inextricably compressed together, and it is this tight compression that gives them their capacity to energize action. What makes emotion embed this 'energy' is that it always concerns the self and the relationship of the self to culturally situated others. (*Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* 11)

Illouz's theoretical insight points to the connection between emotion, subjectivity and social relation that Haddaway's lyrics embed in their questioning of love; she turns away from psychology and toward cultural sociology as a method of enquiry[26].Yet the form of the couple is still *imagined* to be determined by this emotion, and therefore a cultural studies methodology – with sources from many disciplines – is the one I employ for my work on romantic love and neoliberalism.

Love's link to sexuality and life-energy[27] means that it is a strange kind of category, with its tangles connected to most, if not all, of social life. Yet love's social character is debated: ostensibly an expansive social force – an emotion that links individuals into couples and families – many critics point to the anti-social tendencies of

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[26] "Emotion is certainly a psychological entity, but it is no less and perhaps more so a cultural and social one: through emotion we enact cultural definitions of personhood as they are expressed in concrete and immediate but always culturally and socially defined relationships." (*Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* 3)

[27] Herbert Marcuse calls this eros in *Eros and Civilization*; in a sense, contemporary romantic love is the channeling of eros into the couple.

the couple to question love's practices. Literary critic Lisa Appignanesi's *All About Love: Anatomy of an Unruly Emotion* argues that, at least since William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, romantic love in English has been a socially disruptive force[28]. Appignanesi's tone is sardonic when describing love's critics, and luminous when extolling love's potential:

> Over the last decades, love has been scoffed at as sentimental goo, derided as a myth to keep the masses enslaved, exposed as mental malady, and inveighed against as a power-monger in romantic garb bent on oppressing women in particular. Yet love bears within it a world of promise, a blissful state removed from the disciplines of work, the struggle for survival, and even the rule of law and custom. The promise coexists with the knowledge that love can bring with it agonizing pain, turmoil, hate, and madness—and in its married state, confinement, boredom, repetition. (14)

The litany of critiques of love Appignanesi rehearses (rationalist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, and feminist, respectively) cannot stop love's promise from capturing our imaginations. But freedom from society (work, law, custom) sometimes misfires, particularly in marriage, to its opposite: the agency promised can become confinement, and the excitement of love can become boredom in marriage. There is thus a disjunct between the feeling's affirmation of agency and the social form that validates it, a particularly felt contradiction when love is imagined as a sign of authentic expression, wherein the practice of romantic agency nullifies its openness. To the extent that romantic relationships are privileged over other social connections – and thereby make a certain kind of love separate – the practices of romantic love serve both as a basis of, and limit to, solidarity. The practices of romantic love enact this ideological separation. From dates to housing to honeymoons, the couple atomizes itself as a condition of its own possibility. This is also potentially love's undoing, as the atomized couple pulls away from other social supports and into its own social dynamics. Romantic relations are thus not only a site of intense mediation by supposedly external forces, but also have the potential of re-articulation away from the toxic economism of our common sense.

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[28]The "two houses" that Romeo and Juliet come from are engaged in open violence at the opening of the play, an "ancient grudge"; their love is a disruption of the social antagonism that divides their society. Ironically, the love that Appignanesi situates as a disruption seals peace at the play's conclusion, as the deaths of the lovers validate their mutual affection and deliver a newly stabilized social order in Verona. This dynamic of personal love securing social peace is now a ubiquitous trope.

If neoliberalism remakes the constituent terms, modes of thinking, and categories of analysis of liberalism, how does it intervene in liberal romance? A short excursus on love in liberalism is useful to contextualize the next section of my work. Within liberalism generally the romantic couple privatizes[29] love's contradictions. Anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli's *Empire of Love*[30] theorizes this imagination of love's origin as "the intimate event" – a retroactively constituted moment in which a new subject emerges, the "subject-in-love" whose self-knowledge and subjection is, unlike juridical or economic subjects, formed in a "relay" with the beloved (Povinelli 187-8). In "the intimate event," liberal subjects face a fundamental contradiction: love is conceived as the ultimate expression of individual agency, and *at the same time* love is not self-created – it is impossible for the liberal subject to be the source of their own love. In *Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sara Ahmed draws on Sigmund Freud to suggest that "love makes the subject vulnerable, exposed to, and dependent upon another, who . . . threatens to take away the possibility of love" (125); this not only means that the beloved benefits the subject of love, but that they also hold power over them – a problem for liberalism, whose subject is insistently framed as "autological"[31]. Love thus "expands humanity" (176) by forming

[29]In this dissertation I use the term "privatize" in two interlocking but distinct ways: first, referring to the transformation of a feeling or expression or concern into a "private" matter: that which is opposed to the public, the responsibility of individual or family and not the social. The second, related but distinct usage, refers to the transfer of previously public goods into private enterprises. Both are constituent operations of neoliberalism: while the latter is clearly a function of its economic policies, the former evinces its shrinking of public life. Both oppress the poor (whose responsibilities are increased as their capacities shrink), yet the latter enriches capitalists and provides an outlet for investment (crucial to the expanded social reproduction of capitalism).

[30] Povinelli, like many of the critics I cite, situates neoliberalism as a 'new twist' in liberalism, rather than a new form of social organization (Chan et al 130). Accordingly, I rely on her work as an account of a longer and more basic concern for settler-colonial capitalist society, in tension with certain practices of neoliberal cultures but not necessarily antagonistic to all of them.

[31] Povinelli uses the term "autological" for the discourses of the liberal subject – a self-making, self-describing author of one's own story, "the I of enunciation." This is our subject. Povinelli pairs this subject with the "genealogical society," or the "discourses, practices, and fantasies about social constraint placed on the autological subject by various kinds of inheritances" (3). This is where our subject becomes limited (as if somehow subjectivity pre-exists these formative histories). This binary opposition is rooted historically in the liberalization of Europe, as capitalism replaced feudal ways of life rooted in custom and thus "liberated" serfs from inherited social position. Love's "intimate event" is thus a contradiction at the meeting-place of two discourses that constitute liberal worldview: "autology" and "genealogy." In that relation, Povinelli argues, liberal social theorists such as Jurgen Habermas situated "intimate recognition" as a way to socially deracinate the self. This is a necessity for crafting settler-colonial nationalism out of immigrant populations, but also for liberal notions of equality, which have a problem – to put it mildly – with difference. Normative love is thus a dream of a form of equality that would "hegemonize the entire social field, solving once and for all the difference of difference" (Povinelli 179). As the subject-in-love is recognized as I, they could be freed from the restrictions of

the family on a voluntary basis. While the presumption of equity embedded in this relation is a phantasm, it grounds the emphasis on choice that pervades liberal political thought. All political, social, economic, and cultural pressures that might influence the subject to form a family – and therefore rob the liberal subject of their precious self-elaborating agency – vanish into romantic love, which is expected to produce the normative family through the couple.

In the case of romantic love, what Illouz refers to as a "compression" into the couple is not guaranteed: cultural voices at every level have insisted on the distinction between love and the couple, both theoretically and in practice. The dissonant lovers of cultural criticism point out the form-loosening elements of love's vernacular, its messy too-muchness, Berlant's "dust ball" tangled in too many significations to map. Fèlix

Guattari distinguishes the couple-form from love in a 1980 interview by philosopher and free radio activist Tetsuo Kogawa; emphasizing the rupture of subjectivity that occurs in love, Guattari rejects the theory that desire is exclusively "the wish to possess partial objects, to take possession of a territory" (36). Guattari argues against the cynical psychoanalytic reading: love "cannot be reduced to such a libidinal operation because it is first and foremost the fact that in a closed universe, in two closed universes, things appear that previously seemed impossible" (36). Love's ties pierce the subject, expanding their world. Romantic love's own expansive dissonance is rooted in this imagined moment: love strikes the subject from outside but is also a deeply authentic expression of self, love is both subjective feeling and objective force, and while love is imagined as voluntary it leads the subject to social obligation. Yet this is also the aspect of love that seems to destabilize the concepts of self and freedom that it is supposed to express – the "I" as self-making – at the same moment when the "subject-in-love" is recognized by their lover (Povinelli 187-8). Guattari recognizes that love's potential future is often "closed off again, recovered, or taken over by the form of the couple" but he insists that "desire is first of all this activation of another world of possibilities" (36); Povinelli theorizes the importance of liberalism's annexation of the

"geneology" and remade into themselves alone, understood, finally, by their lover. In contemporary liberal settler colonies, Povinelli argues, this discourse of tradition as restriction on the subject is a conception that colonizers deploy toward Indigenous peoples, whose practices or social norms are interpreted as restrictions on individual freedom. Restrictions imposed by capitalist society are excepted from this critique, of course, by virtue of having dissolved older forms of "bondage" such as serfdom.

other world of love to its geo-political imaginary. Povinelli similarly highlights that “the intimate event” is also “a political event” (175): “a liberal mode of self-abstraction and social unity” that is not only considered “a substantive good in and of itself” but *“opposes* all other modes of organizing intimacy” (177; emphasis in original). Any other love just ain’t love.

Unsurprisingly, then, to question the value of love risks being seen as jaded, detached, cruel, or pitiable, as Laura Kipnis observes in her polemic *Against Love.* Kipnis frames romantic love ambivalently, as:

> A place to experiment with wishes and possibilities and even utopian fantasies about gratification and plenitude, or love can be harnessed to social utility and come spouting the deadening language of the factory, enfolded in household regimes and quashed desires – an effective way of organizing acquiescence to shrunken expectations and renunciation and status quos. It can fasten itself to compulsory monogamy – not a desire, but an enforced compliance system (199).

As Kipnis’ list exemplifies, there are many fates of love that are undesirable, even confining. Yet Kipnis’ criticism is not of love as an intentional action, a feeling, or a desire; her critique stems from love’s connections, what it is “harnessed to” or where love “can fasten itself.” The object of Kipnis’ polemic is the articulation of love, not its essence.

Neoliberalism: History, Economy, Theory

The contradictory elements of romantic love – its semantic and temporal incoherences – point toward the determination of the emotion by the form of the couple, a political, social, cultural, and economic form. In what ways does neoliberalization intervene in this articulation of feeling to form, of romantic love and the romantic couple? The next section of my dissertation turns attention to neoliberalism before taking up this question directly. As I suggested at the beginning of this introduction, how and at what levels neoliberalism is theorized – and the term is at times so broadly used that it becomes incoherent – dramatically alters not only the results but also potential forms of cultural analysis. The context of neoliberalism's political ascension within the U.S.A. in the latter half of the 20th century causes a number of these terminological confusions. As

Neil Smith points out in *Endgame of Globalization*, “liberalism” in the late 20th century U.S.A. was understood to oppose feudalism, fascism, and communism as well as racism, the Cold War and imperialism (Smith 28). This partially explains why Milton Friedman, one of neoliberalism's most vocal and effective proponents in the U.S.A., had abandoned the term by the late 1970s. Friedman's connection to Ronald Reagan and other Republican Party figures also helps to explain the jettisoning of “neoliberal”; in Reagan's political context, where “liberal economics” popularly signifies the welfare state, not its dissolution, the “neoliberal” identification would have alienated Republican (conservative) supporters. So what is neoliberalism; or, perhaps more relevantly, how do I use the term in this dissertation?

Critical definitions of neoliberalism have varied based on the emphasis, approach, or discipline of the theorist. In Michel Foucault’s *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures, neoliberalism is conceived as a remaking of the liberal “art of government,” that rejected command and control in favour of regulating “the conduct of conduct” (a phrase Foucault uses repeatedly in the lectures). Daniel Stedman Jones conceptualizes neoliberalism as a market ideology that valorizes individual liberty and the rational, self-interested actor in the competitive marketplace in opposition to state limits on freedom (2). In a Marxist analysis of neoliberalism, Jamie Peck instead situates neoliberalism as a “historically specific configuration of class relations, dispossessive accumulation, and regressive redistribution” backed by the state and capital (Peck 31). Linking this alliance of state and capital to the U.S.A. and a network of states, Aihwa Ong writes that “American neoliberalism is viewed as a radicalized capitalist imperialism that is increasingly tied to lawlessness and military action” but “Asian governments have selectively adopted neoliberal forms in creating economic zones and imposing market criteria on citizenship” (1). Ong observes that in the US, “market-based policies and neoconservatism” are used to refer to neoliberalism, which Ong sees as a technology of government that casts “governing activities as nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need technical solutions” (3). Drawing on Foucault’s work, Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* theorizes this variety of approaches: “neoliberalism is a specific and normative mode of reason, of the production of the subject, ‘conduct of conduct,’ and scheme of valuation” but that “its differential instantiations and encounters with extant cultures and political traditions” lead to “diverse content and normative details, even different idioms” (48). Another contemporary valence of terminological

confusion is the fact that since the near-failure of the international monetary system in 2007-8, the term “neoliberalism” has been deployed primarily as a vehicle of critique; few economists and political figures use the term to identify themselves (Boas and Gans-Morse, qtd in Peck 13). With this increased critical usage, the term's specific object can be rendered indistinct: neoliberalism is now sometimes used as “shorthand for the ideological atmosphere” or a synonym for the logic of globalisation (Peck xi). This illustrates Eve Sedgwick's observation that the repeated usage of critical terms with ethical urgency can mask a “gradual evacuation of substance” as the status quo collapses into the critical term (12). Despite these objections, Brown writes that “neoliberalism is neither singular nor constant in its discursive formulations and material practices” but insists “this recognition exceeds the idea that a clumsy or inapt name is draped over a busy multiplicity” (Brown 48). Rather, the complexities of geography, history, and politics have contoured neoliberalization – despite Thatcher’s infamous insistence, the different responses to neoliberalism illustrate the potential for alternatives.

How has neoliberalization reworked the distribution of wealth? While the global dispersion of neoliberal policies makes this question impossible to comprehensively answer, there are common threads. Brown summarizes neoliberalism's policy ensemble as follows: deregulating industry and capital flows, reducing welfare and protection for the vulnerable, privatizing and outsourcing public goods, installing regressive tax schemes, and ending wealth redistribution as economic and social-political policy (Brown *Undoing the Demos* 28). Drawing on the data analysis of Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy, Harvey shows the sweeping economic effects of neoliberal policy since the late 1970s. As political economic analyses have shown, neoliberal policies led to the total reversal of the previous twenty years' reductions to inequality in both the U.S.A. and U.K. (Harvey *Neoliberalism* 16-9). Neoliberal shifts improved the position of the rich dramatically, in terms of salaries[32] and share of wealth.[33] Harvey thus figures neoliberalization as “a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” rather than the “utopian”

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[32] Panitch and Gindin 184.

[33]Harvey shows that the trend can also be observed in France after the Socialist Party government led by Francois Mitterand accepted an IMF loan in 1985. (Harvey *Neoliberalism* 16-8)

project of its founding thinkers (Harvey *Neoliberalism* 19). By the time Ronald Reagan's two terms finished, the wealthiest 1% in the U.S.A. had been restored to their pre-WWII wealth levels, which had been decreasing due to redistributive policies since 1965 (Harvey 16). Wealth disparity in the U.S.A. has continued to increase since: in 2017 wealth inequality again reached 1929 levels (Cooper 135), and the U.S.A. has also seen surging inequality measured by income, as the top 1% of earners have increased their share of national income from 11% (1980) to 20% (2018) while the bottom 50% have seen theirs shrink from 21% to 13% over the same period (Alvadero et al 8). This increase in wealth did not "trickle down," as Reagan famously claimed it would: policies that attacked organized labour were particularly effective in lowering real wages (Pollin qtd in Harvey Neoliberalism 25), while taxes were halved on the highest earners, and rose slightly for the lowest income bracket (Dumenil and Levy, qtd in Harvey Neoliberalism 26). The federal minimum wage in the U.S.A. fell from a poverty level wage in 1980 to 30% below it by 1990 (Harvey Neoliberalism 25; 59). This has not been evenly distributed.

Misconceptions of who constitutes the working-class – compromised thinking and politics inherent to what Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism* theorized as "racial capitalism" – have often obscured the uneven effects of neoliberal economics in practice. An emphasis on the affective disappointment of privileged white industrial workers, a result of the restructuring of production and remaking of gender, tends to overshadow the extent to which neoliberalism has exacerbated racist economics. The surge in income inequality in the U.S.A. that Harvey documents is coeval with a 75% decline in the wealth of median Black families, a 50% decline for median Latinx families, and an *increase* of 14% for median white families (Asante-Muhammad et al 5). That is, neoliberalism is not only a class offensive, but through the determination of class by race it is a contradictorily racist offensive – contradictory because its dominant imaginary is egalitarian while it exacerbates the inequities woven into racial capitalism. As Marxist-feminist analyses demonstrate, a departure between dominant imaginary and economic effect characterizes neoliberal social reproduction, where gendered and racialized inequities co-exist with the insistence on formal equality. The disjunct is partly explained, within common sense, by the assumption of inequity that neoliberalism normalizes and, crucially, by a shift in the meaning of freedom which alters the perception of inequity. Under neoliberalism's interlocking discourses of freedom and personal responsibility, the

marginalized individual must be given opportunity rather than equity. As my next section explores, discourses of freedom and love are both engaged in the reproduction of these relations.

One of neoliberalism's historical achievements is the synchronization of commonsense discourses of social, cultural, and political freedom with those of economics. Common sense, in this usage, is *not* the basis of an argument for a shared culture, as in Immanuel Kant's works. Rather, following Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, "common sense" is theorized as a fragmentary residue of past philosophical systems, as contradictory a body of knowledge as that history. Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea provide a robust description of the term in "Common-sense Neoliberalism":

> But what exactly is common sense? It is a form of 'everyday thinking' which offers us frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world. It is a form of popular, easily-available knowledge which contains no complicated ideas, requires no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep thought or wide reading. It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection. It is pragmatic and empirical, giving the illusion of arising directly from experience, reflecting only the realities of daily life and answering the needs of 'the common people' for practical guidance and advice (Hall and O'Shea 8-9).

Distribution of a given philosophy's tenets across disparate cultural networks is crucial to achieving the kind of spontaneous organization that neoliberalism fosters. Aligning with an uncritical approach to decision-making, this ready-to-hand form of ideology is a contested field.

Challenging widespread assumptions is one way to integrate a new way of thought into a given cultural formation. The first chapter of David Harvey's *Brief History of Neoliberalism,* "Freedom's Just Another Word . . ." opens:

> "For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit. If successful, this conceptual apparatus becomes so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question" (Harvey 5).

Harvey goes on to outline how neoliberal economists and government officials "embedded" the logic of the market and competition within common sense by casting

them as crucial to personal liberty[34], indeed redefining freedom in these terms. Freedom modeled on the market's assumption of equal exchange is cinched to other forms (e.g. political) through a reimagination of life as economic and human action as based on cost-benefit analysis. Tasked with remaking the Keynesian and Fordist compromises of the 20th century, neoliberalism rethinks the terms of classical liberalism. Neoliberals successfully reframed social institutions – including trade unions, collective organizations, and consumer groups – as threats to personal fulfillment and impediments to the desires of individuals. Harvey's book disenchants this "freedom" through economic data and historical evidence: neoliberalization produces the degradation of the poor, the stratification and impoverishment of the working and "middle classes," and the concentration of wealth and political power with economic elites, all propped up by war and the erosion of democracy.

Harvey's argument is primarily historical and political-economic, supported by macroeconomic data, but the first chapter title is drawn from a popular love song: "Me and Bobby McGee,"[35] now famous due to Janis Joplin's posthumously released cover [1971] . Freedom is far less compelling as a sign of social value when it slips into the feeling of loss after a lover's departure, and for Harvey "Me and Bobby McGee" is resituated as an implicit critique of capitalist (but particularly *neoliberal*) ideas of freedom itself. Harvey uses the quotation to echo his argument that "freedom" has had its common sense meaning redefined by neoliberalism[36]. Harvey foreshadows his argument by omitting the end of the well-known line ". . . for nothing left to lose". Using a metaphor that compares a breakup to "neoliberalization" resituates freedom as a sense

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[34] Stedman Jones' *Masters of the Universe* traces this rewriting of freedom to a trio of books by the "founding fathers" of neoliberalism: Karl Popper's *The Open Society*, Friedrich Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, and Ludwig von Mises' *Bureaucracy*, which all emphasised "the crucial relationship between economic and political liberty" and privileged free market capitalism as core to freedom (Jones 34;48).

[35] Lyrics by Kris Kristofferson and Fred Foster. Among others, Roger Miller, Kenny Rogers and the First Edition, Olivia Newton-John, Gordon Lightfoot, Bill Haley and his Comets, Statler Brothers, Charley Pride, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Kristofferson himself each released a version of the song. Joplin's 1970 recording (released 1971) was not only certified platinum for a million sales but is the defining version of the song.

[36] Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* [1962] makes this argument explicitly, emphasising the tension between government provision to citizens and a conception of freedom through individual choice, free association, and the market. Yet, as with Hayek's work, this economizing is set against a moral backdrop in which the "free man" is "proud of a common heritage and loyal to common traditions" (2).

of social abandonment, of loneliness if not alienation. Harvey's metaphor suggests the resituating of the state's attitude toward its subjects yet invokes love: to have no one left to lose is, here, to operate as a neoliberal subject, free from restraint or obligation or connection to society. The song's nostalgia for a romantic relationship serves as an analogue for the conservative tenor of many critiques of neoliberalism that express a nostalgia for the social contract, welfare state, or Keynesian economic policy, as if a little amelioration would be "good enough." The lyric subject rejects freedom, and instead desires a return to the past – where they had someone to lose, where "feelin' good was easy, Lord, when he sang the blues / feelin' good was good enough for me / good enough for me and Bobby McGee." The song's last verse insists "I'd trade all my tomorrows for a single yesterday / of holding Bobby's body close to mine" - where love and "feelin' good" are more important than future existence itself. When Joplin associates freedom with love's absence, as "just another word for nothing left to lose," she reverses the expected valuation of freedom, which is instead cold comfort for love lost. The song expresses the alienation that follows the end of love, but like Haddaway's query extending beyond his subject's capacity, this message is undercut by the form: through its address to a listening audience, those who might sing along with the "la da da" of the song's extended refrain become lonely together. The song's popularity might tell us something about the collective desire for desire, the love of a love so strong its loss would mean the end of futurity itself. Is this freedom?

Homo Oeconomicus in Love?

A crucial innovation of neoliberalism is recasting the human as an economic subject, establishing formal equality through discourses of "human capital" or "economic man," *homo oeconomicus*. Neoliberal reinventions of *homo oeconomicus* rely partly on Adam Smith, for whom this figure was masculine, given limited scope and driven to "truck, barter, and exchange" (qtd in Brown 10), and whose "enlightened self-interest" enabled his individual endeavours to benefit himself as well as society. Yet *Homo oeconomicus* for 19th century liberals was one of several *homos*, including *politicus*, *juridicus*, and *legalis*, not a singular heuristic through which human motivations could be understood. Neoliberalism remakes *homo oeconomicus* as "grid of intelligibility" (Foucault 252), and the subject is recast as an "entrepreneur of himself" whose every action is considered in the abstracting light of economics. One aspect of this rethinking of

the subject – one attended to by Federici – is a changed relation between economic subject and consumption that Michel Foucault noticed within neoliberal economic theory and particularly Gary Becker, wherein commodity consumption is recast as the production of one's own satisfaction (Foucault 226). Not all human activity can be monetized profitably, but *homo oeconomicus* acts on market-based metrics even in nonmonetary activities; as a "human capital," the subject is divided between social, educational, financial, and other capitals, which are flattened as properties of the subject. Neoliberal reason is therefore unlimited in scope, despite drawing its validity from economic science: by the 1980s the Chicago School economists who popularized neoliberalism had expanded market-based analyses to law, regulation, welfare, sex, and the family (Jones 92-3). This "reduction" of the subject, according to Michael Peters, "reflects the lack of any social or collective dimension in explaining behaviour" and normalizes a straight, white, masculine subject without marking that normalization (Peters 126). Abstracting these results from the social ground in which they are generated and reproduced, gender and race are also naturalized as properties of a preexisting subject. Policy-makers, educators, artists, bureaucrats, and public figures privilege, incentivize, and coerce this subject into being.

The individual economic agent of neoliberalism relies heavily on Smith's notion of the "invisible hand" that turns self-interest into the common good, a concept Smith mentioned only once in *Wealth of Nations* (Foucault 278). Friedman linked the invisible hand to the price mechanism that von Mises and Hayek theorized as a means to organize autonomous individuals (Jones 108); this renders *homo oeconomicus* eminently governable rather than someone to be left alone, as Smith had theorized him. Foucault thus theorized the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* as "a subject of interest within a totality which eludes him[37] and which nevertheless founds the rationality of his egoistic choices"; his interest drives him, such that "his action has a multiplying and beneficial value through the intensification of interest" (277-8). Unsurprisingly, individual choice and allocation of resources become the primary foci. Yet as neoliberalism's utopian (or dystopian) horizons have receded – a cost of its influence taking hold within a globalizing and imperialist state – governance has shown its own intensified interest in this figure.

[37] Neoliberals consider this figure gender neutral; the importance of this shift is part of what I explore when I turn to gender and the work of love.

Remaking governance to guarantee the conditions for profit-making subordinates the freedom of *homo oeconomicus* to the demands of economic growth. The same constant self-improvement that characterizes *homo oeconomicus* is framed in terms conducive to the economic imperatives of capitalism as "the development of oneself and one's employability" becomes "the long-term personal project underlying all the others" (Boltanski and Chiapello 111). The contradictions involved prompt a rethinking of Foucault's *homo oeconomicus*, according to Brown, given the state's tendency to "sacrifice" individuals to the demands of capital accumulation. Re-theorizing the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* as "an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio across all of its endeavours and ventures" (Brown 10). Yet, as Beckert insists, "Neoliberalism entails not just an economic vision for society, but also a moral one. It is a moral economy that envisions the future not as a collective project, but rather as an indefinite number of individual projects for which the state sets the frame" (Beckert 322). This project of self-fashioning renders each individual responsible for their body, image, success, and destiny, particularly where ostensibly "personal" relations such as those covered by romance are concerned.

Illustrated by the opening to the published version of Gary Becker's Nobel Prize in Economics lecture, "The Economic Way of Looking at Behaviour" [1996], neoliberal economists consistently insist that human behaviour is more complex than economic self-interest. Becker's second paragraph helps clarify the political stakes neoliberals perceive in their arguments:

> Unlike Marxian analysis, the economic approach I refer to does not assume that individuals are motivated solely by selfishness or material gain. It is a method of analysis, not an assumption about particular motivations. Along with others, I have tried to pry economists away from narrow assumptions about self-interest. Behavior is driven by a much richer set of values and preferences (385).

The confusion of class and individual interests here – the defining categories of Marxist and liberal analysis, respectively – enables Becker to dismiss Marxist analysis as economistic while explicitly asserting "the economic way of looking at behaviour". When describing how a "human capital" makes decisions, Becker's language reinscribes cost-

benefit analysis as an appropriate model for nearly every kind of preference, illustrating the focus on decision-making that pervades neoliberal economics:

> Human capital analysis starts with the assumption that individuals decide on their education, training, medical care, and other additions to knowledge and health by weighing the benefits and costs. Benefits include cultural and other nonmonetary gains along with improvement in earnings and occupations, whereas costs usually depend mainly on the forgone value of the time spent on these investments. The concept of human capital also covers accumulated work and other habits, even including harmful addictions such as smoking and drug use. Human capital in the form of good work habits or addictions to heavy drinking has major positive or negative effects on productivity in both market and nonmarket sectors.
>
> …The various kinds of behavior included under the rubric of human capital help explain why the concept is so powerful and useful. It also means that the process of investing or disinvesting in human capital often alters the very nature of a person: training may change a life-style from one with perennial unemployment to one with stable and good earnings, or accumulated drinking may destroy a career, health, and even the capacity to think straight. (Becker 392)

In these two paragraphs, economizing is rooted at a pre-economic level, and pervades calculating attitudes toward culture, money, and even time. Further illustrating the twinned discourses of markets and morals that characterize neoliberal thought, Becker not only reinforces dominant moral values about productivity and drug-use but does so by linking them to their "market" effects. Crucially, human capital even extends to Becker's understanding of "change" in "the very nature of a person" – that is, while capitals are capacities that a person has, and thereby changeable, they are interlinked to a pre-existing essence that is only comprehensible at the level of the individual. Neoliberal subjectivity is thus a question of economizing, not monetizing alone; Becker's work *assumes* "that when men and women decide to marry, or have children, or divorce, they attempt to raise their welfare by comparing benefits and costs" (395). Here, it is an economic and individualistic perspective that relegates cultural and social practices to a second order of importance, mere modifications of the pre-existing economic subject's rational choice that installs itself in the ready-to-hand forms of consciousness demanded of subjects within a capitalist society[38].

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[38] The common sense appeal of Becker's way of thinking is something he highlights throughout his writing. For only one example, consider his methodological justification: "the rational choice

What role does romance play within neoliberal subjectivity? For a subject whose material basis assumes the family, set within a culture where romantic love underpins family-formation, love is crucial. If, as Brown suggests, neoliberal subjects are always economizing, love could serve as a working neoliberal's break from calculation as it does in the imaginations of bourgeois "domestic bliss" that Friedrich Engels critiqued in *The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State* in the 19th century. Why not? After all, romances still appeal to this life-long marriage as a sign of love, despite its waning. Proponents of neoliberalism indeed justify capitalist society by invoking love and marriage. Economist and Fraser Institute fellow Steven Horwitz's 2016 blog post "How capitalism made marriage (not Valentine's Day) about love," deploys a common sense historiography of feeling and social relations. Horwitz relies upon the popular historical argument[39] that capitalism has changed the family from an economic structure focused on production – "little tiny firms, usually with dad as CEO and everyone else as, effectively, an employee" – to "the center of consumption" focused on "psychological satisfaction" rather than economic compulsion (n.p.). The economic subject is cast backward into the past, but his economizing is located *within* the family. According to Horwitz capitalism separates the family from economic production, which had been its primary function "for most of human history," to make it about love. Claiming that love based marriages had "previously been the province of the rich", Horwitz's historiography is absent; it begins to fall apart when considering the compression of family and government within monarchical and aristocratic families or the economic politics of the guild system (as Engels pointed out in *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*). Horwitz concludes this argument with a direct link between the promotion of romantic love, Western chauvinism, romantic commodities, and the development of capitalism:

> What we now know as the love-based companionate marriage was born out of the economic transformations and increased wealth that came with capitalism. So while you're handing your sweetie a card or some chocolate, or raising a glass of wine at a nice dinner out, don't forget that romantic

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approach to marriage and other behavior is in fact often consistent with the instinctive economics 'of the common person'" (Becker 396 quoting Farrell and Mandell).

[39] See, for example, the National Women's History Museum web article "The History of Romance," which asserts that 18th century US society "encouraged young people to select their marriage partners based on their romantic attachments" (n.p.).

> love's role as the central feature of marriage for the vast majority of the Western world is one of the many glorious gifts of capitalism. (n.p.).

Note, here, how capitalism "gives back" our emotions to us as it moves the economy out of the home. As our affective capacities are given legitimacy within the form of the couple, the ideology of love links the subject to a hegemonic social form insistently painted as a special zone free from the demands of economics. Here, too, is the common sense of neoliberalism, which relies upon the freedom of the sovereign economic subject for its liberatory arc.

But there is still a tension, here, between this 'non-economic' love and normative ideas of the human as economic subject that Horwitz's own post relies upon for its historiography, one raised to contradiction in the stereotypical Valentine's Day date Horwitz evokes. If romantic love is marriage's organizing principle, and marriage is noneconomic, why are the signs of that love exclusively commodities? Miley Cyrus' "Flowers" extends this to parody when the independence of its feminist subject after a breakup is captured in the song's chorus: "I can buy myself flowers" forms a list of stereotypical romantic activities, and Cyrus concludes "I can love me better, baby."[40] The *neo*liberal subject can author their own love by repeating its constituent activities of consumption, of self-love – which here reveals itself as a trope of consumerism. The non-economic zone is shot through by economics, but emphatically *not* by the calculation of economic benefit for the agents involved. There is a problem, here, too, for critics of *homo oeconomicus* who position the figure as always looking for monetary gain. As rational, calculating, and forward-looking, *homo oeconomicus* has an odd relation to emotionality. Feelings become capacities and resources to draw upon,[41] while the self-reflexivity of this character, and the constant search for a competitive edge would seem to run counter to the impulse to "lose oneself" in love. This is particularly acute if love is felt as an opening to the other, a piercing of subjectivity.

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[40] "Flowers," from *Endless Summer Vacation* (2023) was written by Miley Ray Cyrus, Michael Pollack, and Gregory Hein. The song debuted on the Billboard Hot 100 at #1, becoming ubiquitous for the first half of 2023.

[41] Sam Binkley summarizes: "In other words, emotions are no longer simply experiences or static states, much less traces of deeper subjective characters and truths: they are dynamic, plastic resources. They are means, never ends, and certainly not ends one strives for through relations of responsible emotional reciprocity with others, or through any deep hermeneutic of the self."

I have discussed the remaking of the economic subject by neoliberalism, and the contradictions this creates for the subject of romantic love. Yet why is romance so important for this subject? And what other roles does it play for neoliberalism? My next two sections explore the way neoliberalism leads to an increased emphasis on romantic love: the necessity of the family – an extension of romantic love – to its privileged subject *homo oeconomicus*, and the withering of the political potential of collective action. If the first channels the subject's need for social reproduction into the family through romantic love, the second contours the subject's aspirations toward small-scale personal relations of which the romantic couple is exemplar.

All of Love's Money: Economizing Social Reproduction

Homo oeconomicus' heroism stands atop the unacknowledged work of "others," and that work is secured by love. Relying on the family for unwaged support work enables *homo oeconomicus'* agency. Carework has for over a century been normatively associated with the family, performed by feminized persons as a labour of love, and contrasted with waged work (as its other).[42] In "Contradictions of Capital and Care" Nancy Fraser argues that "the care deficits we experience today" are rooted in the contradiction between the necessity of social reproduction and "capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation" which "tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies" (100).[43] Fraser's argument relies upon an expanded understanding of capitalism's dynamics: not merely an economic system, it has both an "official economy" and "background conditions" which are presented as "non-economic" (101).

In this, Fraser exemplifies the way Marxist-feminist theorists have expanded the object of the Marxist critique of capitalism beyond strictly economic terms. Cinzia

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[42] Franca Giovanna Dalla Costa's *The Work of Love Unpaid Housework, Poverty and Sexual Violence at the Dawn of the 21st Century* develops a Marxist-feminist critique of the family wage as that which organizes unwaged work, upheld by gendered violence in the home.

[43] Fraser sketches the outlines of such work and their relation to capitalism: "the capitalist economy relies on—one might say, free rides on—activities of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds, although it accords them no monetized value and treats them as if they were free. Variously called 'care', 'affective labour' or 'subjectivation', such activity forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings, forming their habitus and the cultural ethos in which they move." (101).

Arruzza's "Remarks on Gender" insists upon "the need to consider capitalism not as a set of purely economic laws, but rather as a complex and articulated social order, an order that at its core consists of relations of exploitation, domination, and alienation" (4). This theoretical reformulation abandons the reductive notion of capitalism as "an expressive totality," or a totality in which an "automatic or direct 'reflection'" exists either "between the different moments of this totality" or "between one particular moment and the totality as a whole" (Arruzza 16). By reconsidering social practices as moments within an articulated totality, the work of love can be rethought. Rather than the binary of love and exchange, which suggests an oppositional relation between the work of love and the self-valorization of capital, this theoretical insight resets the terms of analysis. Rather than how or why the work is done (out of love or money), I concentrate on how this ideological opposition articulates with the reproduction of capitalist social relations.

As Marxist-feminists have demonstrated, the opposition between feeling and capital – often framed as a moral hierarchy – mystifies the fact that the work of love serves to extract unwaged work. Fraser formulates this in terms of a distinction between productive and reproductive work, between that which is coded as masculine (and therefore compensated with money) and that which is feminine (compensated with love or virtue) (Fraser "Contradictions" 102).[44] Silvia Federici's "The Restructuring of Social Reproduction" [1980] outlines one of the consequences of this theoretical problem, but locates it in the output of economic theory and quotes Becker:

> In fact, what goes under the name of 'homemaking' is (to use Gary Becker's expression) a 'productive consumption' process, producing and reproducing 'human capital,' or in the words of Alfred Marshall, the laborer's 'general ability' to work. Social planners have often recognized the importance of this work for the economy. Yet, as Becker points out, the productive consumption that takes place in the home has had a 'bandit like existence in economic thought.' For the fact that this work is not waged, in a society where work and wages are synonyms, makes it invisible as work, to the point that the services it provides are not included in the Gross National Product (GNP) and the providers are absent from the calculations of the national labor force. (41-2)[45]

[44]Fraser clarifies that social reproduction has never been entirely domesticated by this binary.

[45] The essay has been reprinted in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Federici's appropriation of Becker often propped up the claim, since disproven, that housework was productive of surplus-value. No doubt motivated by the productivist biases of the 1970s, this position has been revised by contemporary social reproduction theorists. Such

Yet, while this work is necessary for the waged worker's ability to produce surplus-value for their employer, it is not considered in the cost-calculations of firms. Fuelled by neoliberal assumptions of heteronormativity, there is an unspoken dependence of the economic subject on this work, which is politically reflected in the importance of the family to neoliberal political ideology.

Whether Margaret Thatcher denying that society exists since there are only "men and women and families"[46] or Milton Friedman insisting "the ultimate operative unit in our society is the family, not the individual" (qtd in Brown 100), the individual and the family are in tension as the basis of neoliberal theory. What Wendy Brown calls this "oscillation" between individual and family has the effect of privileging the (patriarchal) head of the household as the preferred neoliberal subject, *homo oeconomicus,* while simultaneously disavowing that subject's basis in the family (101). The economic subjectivity of those caregivers is inhibited by their role as support: in Brown's analysis, "only performatively male members of a gendered sexual division of labour can even pretend to the kind of autonomy this subject requires" (Brown 103). The gendered division of labour that Fraser and other Marxist-feminists theorize is here naturalized, while simultaneously obscuring the gender (masculine) of *homo oeconomicus*.

Yet, as my first chapter explores, neoliberalization disrupted cycles of working-class reproduction that had been homed in the family. Often, then, the rhetoric of family deployed by Thatcher, Reagan, and others, has been read by critics as sheer cynicism or propaganda. Given the hegemony of family discourse today, this position is not entirely misguided, and certainly illuminates the contradictions between public figures' stated values related to family and their own familial relations. Against suggestions that neoliberalism erodes the family, Melinda Cooper argues that "the question of the family

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work is more commonly theorized as a necessary precondition for capitalist exploitation, as in the work of Nancy Fraser.

[46] The expanded quotation from the infamous *Women's Own* interview Thatcher gave in 1987 is illustrative of the interplay between familialism, unwaged work, charity, and the deconstruction of the social: "...who is society? There is no such thing! There are only individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. ... There is no such thing as society. There is a living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate." (Thatcher, n.p.). Note the normalization of "those who are unfortunate." Like Jesus to Judas Iscariot, Thatcher presumes "the poor you have with you always" (Matthew 26:11, KJV). Unlike Jesus, Thatcher's policies helped expand the number of poor and intensify their poverty.

was as central to the formation of the post-Keynesian capitalist order as it was to welfare state capitalism" (24). Cooper stresses that both neoliberals and neoconservatives saw the erosion of the family[47] as a crucial social issue, and found common ground in its reinvention from the Reagan presidency to the 2010s. Cooper usefully distinguishes the motivations of the two groups, however: while neoliberals instantiate the family as an economic engine to replace the state's now-eviscerated public provision, social conservatives value the family structure as a matter of morality. Yet, as Brown illustrates in her exploration of Hayek's work within *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics in the West*, neoliberals also emphasised the importance of morals wherein both private responsibility for care and normative practices of sexuality are naturalized in the family. Cooper cites Becker's *Treatise on the Family*, in which he claimed not only that family altruism motivated accumulation, but that "the dismantling of welfare represents the most effective means of restoring the private bonds of familial obligation" (Becker qtd in Cooper 60). In Becker's neoliberal world, if the state will not take care of an ailing elder or poor relative, the family must – and so the state should not, so the family will.

While not precisely what Becker imagined, neoliberal economics and reactionary social politics both celebrated huge victories in 1996 with the remaking of welfare and incentivizing of heterosexual marriage. Under President Bill Clinton and with bipartisan support, the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) significantly reduced welfare spending, while the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) gave US states the right to ignore other states' same-sex marriage licenses, thereby allowing them to deny same-sex couples state benefits of marriage. PRWORA also removed the Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which had provided direct payments from the federal government to women with children whose fathers were "deceased, absent, or unable to work" (Blank and Blum 29). The program first allowed states to exclude those deemed essential to the economy – allowing southern states to deny benefits to Black women on this basis – and restricted access if a woman had

[47] The U.S.A.'s Census Bureau found that 70% of those surveyed in 1967 lived with a spouse, and by 2018 that number had dropped to 51%. The difference was split between expanding percentages in the "unmarried partner" category and those living alone (now 27%). Of 2018 survey respondents, 37% of men and 30% of women had never been married. Divorce has also become more common, increasing from 2% in 1950 to 9% (for men) and from 2% to 11% (for women) over the same period. Yet marriage is still a dominant category: more than half of respondents were married.

children or a male partner moved in. But the work of the National Welfare Rights Organization, the Welfare Mothers, and Civil Rights activists more broadly meant a broader access to AFDC funding). The law's "Personal Responsibility" operates as an ideological shift: from the demand for state provision to accepting the cost of parenting as part of one's duties. Simultaneously, the law empowered government to police so-called "absent fathers" more closely. The praise for PRWORA has been carried forward to the neoliberals of the 21st century: Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* specifically lauds Clinton for welfare reform and calls for Black families to form two-parent households, going so far as to defend Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamously racist The Negro Family: The Case for National Action. Welfare programs were and are seen as an impediment, not only to work, but to the freedom to seek work, echoing the arguments of Hayek in *Road to Serfdom* and Friedman in *Capitalism and Freedom*. "Reconciliation" is the state's solution to social ills, but what is to be reconciled is the worker's embrace of the wage, a reconciliation that demands a withdrawal of resources to the poor in the name of empowering them to fuel the national economy.

Rather than dismantling the welfare state, neoliberalization instead shrunk and re-tasked it to "impose work and family obligations on the welfare poor" (Cooper 73). This redirected state resources away from redistribution while subsidizing capitalist enterprises (through so-called "work-fare" and generalized job training), reinforcing the family as the primary unit responsible for welfare while redistributing wealth upward. Simultaneously, the neoliberal model of governance combines devolution and responsibilization to place the moral burden of resource provision and decision-making on "the entity at the end of the pipeline" (Brown 132) – with individuals and families most often placed in this position of responsibility for impossible decisions. To enable this shift in welfare provision, cuts to existing programs also included ideological projects that teach the poor to embrace marriage and work, and to hold themselves responsible for economic hardship.[48] The re-tasking of the family with the unwaged work of social

[48] In "Learning to Labor, Love, and Live: Shaping the Good Neoliberal Citizen in State Work and Marriage Programs" sociologists Jonathan Randles and Kerry Woodward report on a study of two of the state-funded training programs that followed from PRWORA. They found that these programs are not only situated as job training, but also training for marriage – and how to stay in it. Rather than a set of strict rules for behaviour, Randles and Woodward suggest that these programs are an example of neoliberal "governance"— a social technology that generally rejects the "command and control" model of government, instead employing "soft-power" and "consensus building" while narrowing the scope of decision-making for participants. Individual freedom is limited to the constraints of the market, through budgeting and training for the workplace,

reproduction redistributes the responsibility for this work; after neoliberal cuts to state day-care centers, kindergartens, after-school programs, pensions, and university funding, this has meant that those who *cannot* afford this work are now responsible for it.

Over the same period that social expenditures have been cut, gender has been resituated. As Fraser summarizes, "the one-two punch of feminist critique and deindustrialization has definitively stripped 'the family wage' of all credibility. That ideal has given way to today's norm of the 'two-earner family'" (Fraser "Contradictions" 112). Fraser highlights the difference between neoliberalism and the managerial (Keynesian) capitalism of the 20th century *and* the preceding articulation of *laissez-faire*:

> Unlike its predecessors, however, its dominant imaginary is liberal-individualist and gender-egalitarian—women are considered the equals of men in every sphere, deserving of equal opportunities to realize their talents, including—perhaps especially—in the sphere of production. Reproduction, by contrast, appears as a backward residue, an obstacle to advancement that must be sloughed off, one way or another, en route to liberation. ("Contradictions" 114)

Waging such work denaturalized it as "women's work," neoliberalization meant it was abandoned by the welfare state, and most of it is unprofitable in a world of declining wages. Tithi Bhattacharya points out that most people need to perform both unpaid domestic work and wage labour to subsist under current conditions (5). Jeanne Neton and Maya Gonzalez argue in "The Logic of Gender"[49] that at the same time as waging care-work "denaturalizes" gender it "renaturalizes" it: a feminized person becomes more economical for a capitalist because of the wage differential.[50] While this denaturalization

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encouraging a rational method to plan and direct love into the family. These programs took neoliberal subjectivity as the basis for their projects. Randles and Woodward describe this imaginary person as "the good neoliberal citizen," a "hard-working, self-regulating human abstraction, one that exists in a social vacuum devoid of race, class, and gender inequalities" (54). They contend that, far from delivering equality, one's ability to occupy this subject-position "hinges in large part on how much race, gender, and class privilege one has" (41). The erasure of class, gender, and race serves, here, to obfuscate the historical causes of poverty.

[49] https://endnotes.org.uk/translations/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender

[50] As Neton and Gonzalez insist, this is a function of markets that emerge within an established gendered sexual division of labour: "As women in many countries slowly but surely received equal rights in the public sphere, the mechanism that reinforced this inequality in the 'private sphere' of the economic — of the labour-market — was already so well established that it could appear as the enactment of some mysterious natural law. Ironically, the reproduction of dual spheres of gender and the anchoring of women to one and not the other is perpetuated and constantly re-established by the very mechanism of the 'sex-blind' labour-market, which obtains not for the man/woman distinction directly but rather for the price distinction, or the exchange-value of their labour-power" (n.p.).

of gender has roots in the state provision of care-work that neoliberalism diminishes, it nevertheless continues as that work is reorganized by capital (through the process of real subsumption). Capitalism's historical undervaluing of reproductive work – coded as feminine – is redoubled by the imperatives of universal economic subjectivity. While the new *homo oeconomicus* delivers the promise of formal equality by replacing the classical liberal "economic man" of John Stuart Mill with an "identity-neutral" economic subject, so that women now have the "choice" to act as *homo oeconomicus* – so this is a victory for one kind of liberal feminism.

The bind is that capitalism and human communities both need the work of social reproduction. Brown argues in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* that under neoliberalism "gender subordination is both intensified and fundamentally altered" by neoliberalism's universalization of *homo oeconomicus*, with "familialism" being its essential and unstated element. This ensures that the unwaged work of women is both necessary and this fact remains "illegible" (Brown 104-5). Brown points out that if "those positioned as women in the sexual division of labor" simply ceased performing unpaid work "the world becomes uninhabitable" (104).[51] Enter love to heal the cuts.

Unsurprisingly, this has not improved the conditions of women as a group, and indeed contradictory impulses from culture and economy often compound.[52]The articulation of a very limited set of feminist goals to the legal regime of capitalism characterizes contemporary neoliberalism. Fraser elaborates on the dual structure that emerges:

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[51] Brown's tone captures the corrosive and expansive effects of a universally-economic subject: "When homo oeconomicus becomes normative across all spheres, and responsibilization and appreciation of human capital become the governing truth of public life, social life, work life, welfare, education, and the family, there are two possibilities for those positioned as women in the sexual division of labor that neoliberal orders continue to depend upon and reproduce. Either women align their own conduct with this truth, becoming homo oeconomicus, in which case the world becomes uninhabitable, or women's activities and bearing as *femina domestica* remain the unavowed glue for a world whose governing principle cannot hold it together, in which case women occupy their old place as unacknowledged props and supplements to masculinist liberal subjects." (104-5)

[52] John Stratton argues in "The Price of Love: The Big Bang Theory, the Family and Neoliberalism" that the cultural pressures of neoliberal subjectivity place mothers in a contradictory position: "The logic of the mother/child structure that I have been describing is that affective, loving mothering, such as has been considered necessary in the modern, nuclear family, actually inhibits success in the neoliberal social order" (184).

> "Globalizing and neoliberal, this regime promotes state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare, while recruiting women into the paid workforce—externalizing carework onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it. The result is a new, dualized organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot, as some in the second category provide carework in return for (low) wages for those in the first." (Fraser 112)

The bifurcated scheme of social reproduction under neoliberalism is not only gendered, but also underpinned by "global care chains" that organize reproductive work internationally through the racial logics that continue to underpin capitalist exploitation. The reproduction of the metropolitan centers of capital accumulation is increasingly performed by women of colour from the global south[53] – but only for those who can afford it. For this reason, feminists have theorized a post-feminist or "neoliberal feminist" turn that articulates limited feminist goals with capitalism. By framing patriarchy as a "fading dinosaur", in Angela McRobbie's terms, post-feminism insists that equality has been reached,[54] while a particularly "neoliberal feminism" restricts the horizon of feminist movement to what can be accommodated by capitalism.[55]

When reproductive labor is outsourced by those who can afford it, it is usually to women of colour, often immigrants from the same countries whose economies have been opened to capitalism by structural adjustment (Federici *Revolution* 71). Immigration schemes not only prevent or allow particular bodies to cross borders, but are also a kind of capital transfer, as Katz points out: the costs and work of social reproduction that go into raising a human and training them in particular social codes and workplace skills are

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[53] The anxieties this prompts are part of my analysis in chapter three; while *Her*'s utopic "cinema of gentrification" spends a great deal of screen time showing its protagonist Theodore's (Joaquin Phoenix) apartment, his private space, it almost entirely omits housework. *Ex Machina* instead inhabits the neoliberal integration of work and life, in its inverted mirror of Her, where housework is at first presented as wage labour but eventually (robotic) slavery, focusing on how Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno) is conditioned to perform it while situating this fact as anxiety-inducing for the 'good' liberal subject.

[54] As Angela McRobbie [2008] writes in *The Aftermath of Feminism*, a critique of "post-feminism," the same discourses of women's empowerment that served as liberatory banners – here the discourse of equality at work – are now incorporated into both corporate marketing and state governance – effectively inscribing "feminism" as a constituent element of Western Liberal Democracies and discursively framing patriarchy as a fading dinosaur. McRobbie argues that "women are currently being disempowered through the very discourses of empowerment they are being offered as substitutes for feminism" (47).

[55] Catherine Rottenberg's work is critical of this turn, identifying it as an attempt to capture the meaning of feminism (and thereby crowd out more radical feminisms from identifying as such).

not refunded to a country when a citizen immigrates (709). Global care chains become a means for capitalist countries reliant on exploited labour to facilitate not just the generic expansion of their labouring populations, but the reproduction of subjects without the costs of their upbringing. As Ong suggests in *Neoliberalism as Exception*, these flows are encouraged and advertised by the workers' home countries; not only for financial transfers of support to family (remittances), but also as a matter of national economic status.[56] Once emigrated, the domestic workers can do the work no longer desired by neoliberal subjects, those waged so well that paying another to perform housecleaning or child-minding is *economical*. Federici highlights how "feminist careers" are built on this underpaid labour in *Revolution at Point Zero* (Federici 66-71), while Peck argues that the "creative cities" movement exemplified in Richard Florida's *Rise of the Creative Class* is based on outsourcing the work of social reproduction, and that this has been naturalized into urban policy and design (198). In both cases, feminized persons are uniquely penalized, since "they remain disproportionately responsible for those who cannot be responsible for themselves" (Brown 105) or, as Derksen points out, for those who do not see this as their work (personal communication).

By emphasizing personal responsibility for economic condition, while aggressively asserting "the family" as the political structure that meets basic needs, neoliberalism doubly marginalizes the poor, who are now not only impoverished but also responsible for their (already impoverished) relatives. Neoliberalism's emphasis on economic self-sovereignty – and therefore on economic dispossession – has only intensified the inequality that was already embedded in the family, as part of a much broader reactionary project of economic and political change. To the extent that the unwaged work now required of the family is done "out of love," love serves to cushion the cuts that constitute neoliberalization. Susan Mannon's "Love in the Time of Neoliberalism: Gender, Work, and Power in a Costa Rican Marriage" provides an example, showing the effects of structural adjustment on one couple and the role of love in changing economic conditions. Mannon's ethnographic study takes places within the context of increased "labor force participation" by women between 1975-1995, as well as the social and economic effects of the structural adjustment policies that were applied in

[56] Ong shows that the uneven distribution of this work and its hyper-exploitation is also regionally organized: in 2004, there were almost 600,000 maids from the Philippines and Indonesia living in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia (196).

Costa Rica after 1981. As Mannon shows, the gendered character of reproductive labor maintains after the “breadwinner/homemaker” household model is endangered by the reduction of men's earnings under neoliberal austerity measures. Mannon does not suggest that her focus on one couple (Antonio and Cecilia) of her 100 interviewees is generalizable across all of Costa Rica, but this pair does provide a poignant example of the ideology of love in practice. After Antonio's access to work declines due to the evisceration of the public sector under neoliberal austerity measures, Cecilia starts her own business and becomes the primary earner in the household. Rather than providing reproductive labor to balance this out, however, Antonio and Cecilia's relationship is characterized by increasing conflict. The unequal intensification of work requires a justification, and Christian religion provides the motivation to accept worsening conditions as Cecilia says:

> Sometimes when I'm so angry at Antonio that I cannot breathe, I read this part from the Bible. Listen, as I read it to you. Listen, so that you, too, will know: 'Love is patient; love is kind . . . It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (528).

Mannon highlights the importance of Christian ideology in the relationship she charts by closing her article with this reference to the Bible, stating that “Love in the time of neoliberalism may indeed be contentious and fraught with contradictions, but it is certainly patient and above all enduring (528). Here, the ideology of love theorized by Dalla Costa can still be seen holding the family together, despite neoliberal restructuring altering the economic balance of power in the home and the gendered relation to wage labour.

Simultaneously, the return to a reliance on family – a structure that not all subjects have access to or want to access for basic needs – points to a potential rupture in normative kinship that could change how society reproduces itself. As capitalism is held together by romantic love as substantiated in the couple, radical imaginations of love after capitalism have often taken romantic couples and marriage as a target of critique. Clémence X. Clementine and associates from the Infinite Venom Girl Gang’s pair of polemical articles, “Against the Couple-Form” and “Coda on the Couple-Form: Suturing the Split,” exemplify the politicized and radicalized critique of the couple, which, they argue, not only serves to gate-keep patriarchally organized public space, but also removes those in the couple from collective struggle as it organizes desire toward the

couple as a site of "future solidarity" within a domestic fantasy. Clémence x. Clémentine's conception of the couple places it as one of many forms of "seclusion" from "the social totality." Leave it to capitalism to take love, an emotion driven by the search for connection, and route it into a closed loop. This is the effect of a discourse of romantic love that situates a lover as "the other half" or someone who "completes" the subject. If society is an impossible object, as Laclau and Mouffe argue, because social antagonism forms its limits, then the articulated discourses of the couple and romantic love are themselves anti-social; they create a social antagonism, or limit to sociality, at the edge of the couple. While not within the scope of this dissertation, works such as *Turn This World Inside Out: The Emergence of Nurturance Culture* by Nora Samaran [Naava Smolash] and *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha point to the potential dis-articulation of care-work and romantic love within larger projects of social justice. As a popular propaganda sticker declares: "community care is decolonial love."

Chapter Summaries

My chapters each constellate popular culture with theory, criticism, and my own argumentation to explore a facet of neoliberalism's contradictory relation to romantic love. Each chapter demonstrates the extent to which the abstractions of capital saturate subjectivity, social relations, and emotionality under neoliberalism. In the "impasse" of the present (Berlant), neoliberal subjects turn to romance's myriad articulations with economy to guarantee their social reproduction. Yet, from Springsteen's dry rivers of Fordist collapse to the prison-house of romance in *The Lobster*, these fantasies fail to cohere in the precarious present. Along the way, I demonstrate how the neoliberal present contours romantic relations, limits human flourishing, and motivates its subjects through emotion while siphoning their capacities. By the end of chapter three, I hope to demonstrate that not only are there alternatives to the neoliberal articulation (of love, of economy), but that these are necessary if we – collectively – are to think, act, and build outside neoliberal subjectivity and its individualism.

Chapter one shows how working-class social reproduction remains linked to romantic love through the couple despite the withering of the Fordist family and life-long marriage. Reading the lyrics of love songs from the 1980s – including Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, Billy Bragg, Bon Jovi, and Tracy Chapman – I argue that the

"crisis" of working-class masculinity in the last forty years stems not only from a postmodern suspicion of metanarratives and feminist challenges to patriarchal family relations but, crucially, from neoliberalism's simultaneous remaking of economy and gender. Exploring a set of songs – pop, rock, hair metal, folk – that situate masculine subjects amid the disorganization of town life, I highlight the contradictory demands of neoliberalizing production for working-class men. Read within the context of neoliberal gutting of social expenditures, the affective relations of cruel optimism (Lauren Berlant's term) that these songs deploy toward the couple signals more than a subjective crisis. Through fast cars and dry rivers, the exhaustion of life-long marriage and termination of regular employment signal the breakdown of the Fordist fantasy of "the good life" for masculine subjects and the gender role inhering normative fantasy. Through the artists I attend to, I show how the fantasy of stable social reproduction turns cruel as the temporality of the couple shifts – from life-long marriage to serial monogamy. These popular musicians of the 1980s captured the disappointment of fantasies of romantic love as a guarantee of social reproduction, yet intervened in the terms and dynamics of those fantasies in ways that point toward the contouring of romance by economy. In a broader sense, this chapter shows how romantic fantasy and hegemonic masculinity are remade by neoliberalism, and the extent to which popular culture articulates these with one of the many revolutions of social life under capitalism.

Chapter two moves forward thirty years, to consider how neoliberal subjectivity has integrated itself with romantic love after its internalization within the state. Reading the dystopia of mandatory romantic coupling in Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Lobster* [2015], I explore the contradiction between a romantic subjectivity structured like a market and the cultural politics of romance. Reading Eva Illouz alongside Mark Fisher, I argue that the precarious romantic dystopia – a world in which the couple is considered a condition of humanity, yet love is rigidly policed by an ideology of similarity, in which the end of love triggers romantic capitalization – illustrates not only artistic anti-utopianism but the intractability of this precarity amid the social conditions of neoliberalism. Connecting Lanthimos' depressing romance to *Never Let Me Go* [2010], I suggest that the romantic fantasy of escape highlighted in the previous chapter has grown translucently fragile as the collective capacity for resistance loses its political potential. I contrast the role of romance within these movies, as cold comfort (in *NLMG)* or a means of neoliberal governance (in *The Lobster*) with *The Matrix* [1999] where true love is embodied in

Trinity's salvation of Neo, contrasted with a selfish and possessive 'bad love' in the character of Cipher. Where love in *The Matrix* diegetically serves as what Hardt and Negri call "a force to combat evil" (citation here) the movies I focus upon show how romance has been internalized by contemporary consumer culture, foreclosing alternative modes of social reproduction, normalizing precarity, and coercing consent.

In contrast with my first chapter's focus on working-class romance and neoliberalization in 1980s love songs, and the turn toward romantic market subjectivity in cinema that I considered in chapter two, my third chapter instead turns to the cultural phenomenon of romantic A.I. as a limit-case for neoliberal subjectivity's rearticulation of romantic love and commodification. I connect research on the ChatGPT-3-powered romantic chatbots of Replika – and the interventions in programming made by Luka, Inc. – to an analysis of the movies *Her* [2013] and *Ex Machina* [2014] to situate A.I. romance as an index of neoliberalism's social reproductive contradictions and an exemplary vehicle for neoliberal subjectivity. Extending this inquiry into the spaces that co-produce these subjects, I situate *Her*'s progressive fantasy of A.I. romance within its beautiful "cinema of gentrification," where an emphatically unrestricted mobility underpins the bourgeois whiteness of the central romance and syncs serial romance to consumption. The hybrid domestic and research space of *Ex Machina* instead isolates and restricts the neoliberal subject, cynically disenchanting the romance of *Her* with its technologies of surveillance and imprisonment. Bringing these movies together with the case of Replika illustrates the extent to which cultural imaginations of human-A.I. romance rely on the redeployment of two heteronormative and interlocking fantasies: of being known to the beloved (through data), and of the beloved's willingness to subject themselves to a relation of complementary emotional support. Like many fantasies, these are attended by anxieties that the movies elaborate: that being known through data leads to objectification rather than intimacy, and that the beloved's subjection foreshadows not romantic bliss but resentful abandonment. Read together, these cultural phenomena depict the love-starved loneliness of neoliberalism and the contradictory solutions subjects seek for their social reproduction.

My conclusion addresses the political stakes of love in the theoretical writing of cultural critics. Opposed to exchange, productive of pleasure, and implying a bond beyond that of capital, love's potential opposition to neoliberalism has been considered by many as a necessity for political change. This love is not romantic, in the sense that

the rest of my dissertation considers romantic love, but it is often *romanticized* as a guarantee of good politics. Engaging with the work of Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, and Sara Ahmed, among others, I consider the underpinning for love's social valuation: its troubled tie to ethics, fantasy, and false guarantees, as well as its contested hegemony over positive affect. I argue that our preoccupation with romantic love not only obviates larger political concerns but provides an untenable model for politics. Rooted to the subject and riven by exclusion, I argue that a politics of love offers an easily recuperable source of surplus under capitalism.

Dry Rivers and Fast Cars: Escaping Romantic Fantasy in 1980s Popular Music

Contemporary neoliberal power, in all its repressive subjugating brutal and thanatopolitical force of profit extraction, has not lost its performative bio-productivity in capacitating modes of living subjectivity as well as in inculcating normative fantasies and truth-effects of 'the good life' in self-owned subjects . . . Rather, neoliberal governmentality invests – politically, psychically, and economically – in the production and management of forms of life: it 'makes live', in inculcating modes of one's fashioning of one's 'own' life, while shattering and economically depleting certain livelihoods, foreclosing them, rendering them disposable and perishable.

Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou

Dispossession: The Performative In The Political

I had a job, I had a girl, had something going, mister, in this world

I got laid off down at the lumber yard, our love went bad, times got hard.

Bruce Springsteen

"Downbound Train"

Not only does the lyric subject embody the whole all the more cogently, the more it expresses itself; in addition, poetic subjectivity is itself indebted to privilege: the pressures of the struggle for survival allow only a few human beings to grasp the universal through inversion in the self, or to develop as autonomous subjects capable of freely expressing themselves.

Theodor Adorno

"On Lyric Poetry and Society"

This chapter reads 1980s popular music at the intersection of the romantic and the economic to consider the imbrication of working-class romance with neoliberalization. Through love songs, I show how cultural re-imaginations of love articulate with the disappointment of fantasies of "the good life" for working-class men, reflecting the shifts in gender concomitant to a reorganization of production. "The good life" this chapter criticizes is a normative bourgeois answer to philosophy's ancient question: through a mixture of property ownership, sexual satisfaction, and reproductive normalcy, working-class subjects dream of "the good life" is a dream of ascendancy into the middle-class. I center my inquiry on the music of Bruce Springsteen, drawing his work into dialogue with Billy Bragg, Bon Jovi, and Tracy Chapman to explore the contrasting romantic responses to neoliberalization.

After introducing the extensive critical context situating Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, I consider "My Hometown" from *Born in the U.S.A.* to show how popular culture connects de-industrialization in the U.S.A.'s core manufacturing regions to romantic relations, placing interrupted cycles of working-class social reproduction in dialogue with the restructuring of production. The song's nostalgia memorializes a disappearing way of life in the industrial towns remade by neoliberalization, but its lyric subject nevertheless invests his futurity in marriage, work, and the family – Fordism's social core. Yet Springsteen's work in this period affectively critiques marriage and regular employment at the same historical moment that the promise of "the American Dream" – a particular national twist on the fantasy of "the good life" – is crumbling before its working-class subjects' eyes. I turn to "The River," to show how Springsteen had already registered the disenchantment of this fantasy, through lyrics that articulate romantic futurity to capitalist employment. I read the chorus' return to the dry river – emptied both of water and of love – through what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism." Berlant defines the phrase – an affective relation – in terms of desire and action, as an ongoing temporal orientation to fantasy:

> A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project . . . These optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially (*Cruel Optimism* 1).

Springsteen registers the ways working-class men remain in orbit of an unreachable fantasy which nevertheless structures their lives, providing the pleasure of structure and future-oriented fantasy without delivering them. The romance these songs reflect is part of a broader nostalgia for a past in which working-class social reproduction was embedded in town life, enabling a greater degree of flourishing than the song's present (or today).

I constellate Bon Jovi, Billy Bragg, and Tracy Chapman around Springsteen to show both the similar conditions facing working-class people and the different stances toward romantic love's economic aspects that pervade this period. This chapter thus forms a kind of precursor to the rest of this dissertation, which is primarily focused on material from the 2010s by demonstrating how romantic love remains crucial to working-class fantasies of "the good life" even as the other constituent aspects of that fantasy – class ascendancy through regular employment and home ownership – become unimaginable for most working-class people. Two songs by the English singer, guitarist, and songwriter Billy Bragg demonstrate the transatlantic character of the disappointment and disenchantment of this marriage fantasy: "Honey I'm a Big Boy Now" and "The Marriage" from the album *Talking with The Taxman About Poetry*[57]. Bringing the two songs into dialogue highlights the extent to which cultural critiques of marriage also rely upon discourses of freedom – the same territory of common sense that neoliberalism redefines, and that Springsteen's men chase – yet Bragg also offers *economic* critiques of marriage and consumerism. The nostalgia that Springsteen memorializes becomes the object of criticism in these songs. Elevating the romantic couple (and family) as the ideal social form articulates romance with a broader neoliberal assault on the social as such. Springsteen's love song "Cover Me" from *Born in the U.S.A.* exemplifies this common sense[58]: a conception of the social as hostile contrasts with the way the

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[57] While cultural differences register in these songs, the trans-Atlantic character of neoliberalism – not to mention the level of cultural exchange between England and the U.S.A.– belies a nationalist approach. Both Bragg and Springsteen's work have been consistently approached through national frameworks, as representatives of national working classes or of national dreams. My study contributes to existing scholarship by instead highlighting the shared elements of romantic fantasy – and its disappointment – that these songs deploy and situating those seemingly personal stories within the economics of neoliberalization.

[58] As in my introduction, I use this term following Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci, to designate that mass of inherited wisdom that guides the everyday activities of the common people. Deposited throughout history, common sense instead seems to be ageless truth, time-tested. Differing from Immanuel Kant's usage, which designates a unified understanding of the world, this body of social knowledge is inherently fragmentary.

romantic couples he portrays share a provision of working-class care. Where Springsteen and Bragg capture the disappointments of working-class romance, Bon Jovi's "Livin' On A Prayer" channels optimistic romance for working-class subjects: love is relied upon for the affective and financial stability that the social no longer provides. Yet the illusions of upward mobility, the "American Dream" that Springsteen's work and scholarship on it both orbit, is gone: Bon Jovi's lyric subject has only a prayer and an untenable promise that the couple will be enough. Yet love's capacity to induce sacrifice, to stick together through hard times, is in this song – as in the wider culture – reattached to waged work, and this at the same time as the U.S.A. expands its poorly-paid and deeply precarious service-sector economy. I conclude by considering Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car," which not only vocalizes the power of romantic fantasy to organize a life but contests that ideology affectively and lyrically. Motivated by a romantic fantasy of suburban home ownership to leave town with her lover, the song's subject eventually abandons the fantasy that subjects her to the romantic relationship by reversing the symbolism and the patriarchal power invested in the image of the fast car.

These songs, from very different bands and musical cultures, show how romantic love's relationship to the "ideological code" of family transforms from catalyst to fuel as the Fordist compromise breaks down. Taken together, these songs constitute a chorus of cruel optimism within romantic fantasy, articulating romantic relations with the material practices of social reproduction amid neoliberalization's dramatic changes to economy. By focalizing subjects of romantic relationships under stress, these songs highlight the fading of working-class hopes amid neoliberalization. I approach these love songs as a reflection of what Sean O'Brien frames, in his dissertation *Precarity and the Historicity of the Present: American Literature and Culture from Long Boom to Long Downturn*, as the artistic response to "a growing crisis of social reproduction that presents itself politically and economically as rising precarity and culturally as a foreclosure of futurity" (18)[59]. For my work's focus on relations of romantic love, this foreclosed futurity is starkly addressed in breakups, and the proliferation of failed loves is one way that contemporary culture refracts the crisis of social reproduction. Yet the end of a particular instance of the couple does not usually point toward the unsustainability of the broader social formation which is its ideological home. When it does – and this, I argue, is what happens in the

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[59] Sean's work takes a broader historical perspective than my own, framed via the long downturn of Brenner rather than the neoliberal political and cultural ascent that was a response to it.

music of Springsteen – it is often not *love* that is criticized, but rather the organization of economy or politics surrounding it. Work may kill men's ability to love, even in a Springsteen song, but the ideology of romantic love does not fade over this period; if anything, its grip tightens as if to discipline failed romantic relations and reinforce love's hegemonic social form by rendering it serial.

From anecdotes that capture larger economic shifts to conversations that stage broader cultural politics, these lyric subjects intervene within their own romantic and economic situations, making perceptible both the affective and economic costs of neoliberalization. Considered broadly, rock music has registered the normative ideology of romance, as Lawrence Grossberg writes:

> Nor did rock reject the domestic image of daily life that generally prevailed in the U. S., including the privileged position it gave to the man in both gender and sexual relations. While rock may have remained outside the family, and the image of the rock performer may have positioned him or her outside the family, the vast majority of songs reproduced the desire for love and stable relationships. (145)[60]

The privileged masculine subject that Grossberg identifies is demonstrated, critiqued, and disenchanted in the lyrics of the songs I consider. Grossberg argues that rock allows "a particularly powerful way into the relations of culture and power" by attending to "the often sophisticated ways people use and respond to popular culture" including "the often pleasurable, sometimes empowering, and occasionally resistant nature of their relation to popular culture" (Grossberg 2). The three adjectives – often, sometimes, and occasionally – signal Grossberg's caution toward popular culture's "political resonances" (one I share); while he abandons the "political and cultural elitism which condemned popular culture to be little more than the site of ideological manipulation and capitalist production," neither does he embrace the reduction of "all of our relations to popular culture" to "acts of resistance" (2). Yet rock music entails a

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[60] Grossberg's *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* [1992] considers the relation of rock music to "the political, economic, and cultural forces which are producing a new atmosphere, a new kind of dissatisfaction, and a new conservatism" in the U.S.A. (2). Largely written during the 1980s, Grossberg's title returns to a 1960s hit by The Animals to capture "an anxiety and desperation" that Grossberg perceives from the 1960s onward (2). The shift in popular sentiment that Grossberg's title-change represents – replacing the disenchanted "another boring day in paradise" he had originally planned – allows Grossberg to highlight a historical moment in which "everyone, even George Bush" saw the necessity of social change (1).

"passion" that Grossberg astutely recognized as absent from both political struggle (on the left) and cultural studies in the 1980s: if "culture" is both "an object and source of passion," a cultural study of rock provided Grossberg an opportunity to consider the relation of "theory, politics, and passion" (3).

Grossberg's way into this study is through "attacks on rock" in the 1980s, which signal, to him, the "new conservative alliance" that utilized three strategies to attack rock as part of a much broader reactionary project. First, and least effective in Grossberg's opinion, is overt censorship. This "attack" was introduced to me as a child by my Christian fundamentalist parents, who insisted that rock and roll is the devil's music, it is inherently sexual music (and therefore sinful), it is a gateway to drugs, alcohol, and a host of other social ills. Perhaps motivated by an outsider's view of heavy metal, rock music broadly was situated as the background music for a descent into hell. The second mode Grossberg considers discriminates – as a matter of morals through an argument of taste – between the "early rock" of the 1950s and that of the 1980s. The latter is cast as corrupt and medicalized as harmful for youth. Yet the most effective strategy for defanging rock that Grossberg explores is appropriation; political figures he characterizes as conservatives (such as Bush and Reagan) form extreme examples, but he also notes that rock is "omnipresent" within mainstream culture. Following Stuart Hall's assertion that language and behavior are the media of ideology[61], I focus on the lyrics of these love songs. Yet music, even lyrically-driven music, is not primarily textual: my readings are likewise attentive to the co-implication of lyric and instrumentation through the categories of affect and tone. Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* approaches tone as "a cultural object's affective bearing, orientation, or "set toward" the world" (29), a term that registers both "the dialectic of objective and subjective feeling that our aesthetic encounters inevitably produce" (30) and the "'objectified emotion,'" or unfelt but perceived feeling" (29) that character-driven stories rely upon[62]. Exemplified by

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[61] In "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates" Hall makes this link explicitly: "Language and behavior are the media, so to speak, of the material registration of ideology, the modality of its functioning . . . That is why we have to analyze or deconstruct language and behavior in order to decipher the patterns of ideological thinking which are inscribed in them" ("Signification" 99-100).

[62] As Javier Bardem's performance as Anton Chigurh in the film version of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men* illustrates, a character without expressed feeling is routinely perceived as alien – and often threatening – to the social world, whatever role they might play within that world.

Reagan's appropriation of Springsteen's "Born In The U.S.A." for political campaigning (which Springsteen roundly criticized), the commodification of music relies upon the alienation of a piece of work from its performed context, often recontextualizing the song's lyrical message. The affective politics of rocking out to a chorus of "Born in the U.S.A." have been understood by critics such as Jim Cullen in *Born In the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition* to overwrite the lyrics' criticism of the state's imperialist adventure in Vietnam or the deprivation of the poor. The foundations for this lie in Springsteen's cultural reception.

The Imaginary Boss and the National Imaginary

Springsteen has been a darling of left-leaning rock fans for decades, though it is his early work (less overtly political) which is most popular: work that depicts deindustrializing towns and the euphoria and tragedy of urban life in the U.S.A. Ian Collinson suggests in "A Land of Hope and Dreams? Bruce Springsteen and America's Political Landscape from *The Rising* to *Wrecking Ball*," that this period of Springsteen's music marks a period of transition toward the political in which he evolves from what Raymond Williams terms as an "aligned artist" to a "committed" one (Collinson 67)[63]. This transition to overt politics – outside his performances at benefit concerts – has largely been articulated with the Democratic Party of the U.S.A. Springsteen's staunch support for the Democratic Party has entwined him with neoliberal Democrats – most notably Barack Obama – throughout his career. Despite his lyrics' move to more overt criticism in his later work, as Collinson observes, "Springsteen seems to have been rewarded for his criticism of neoliberalism, certainly in terms of album and ticket sales. The avoidance of criticism may be explained by Springsteen's 'insider' status" (Collinson 71). Exemplifying this status, Phil Murphy, then-Governor of New Jersey and former Goldman-Sachs executive, announced in 2023 that September 23rd would be recognized as Bruce Springsteen Day, the official proclamation read like a fan letter, full of references to biography and lyrics: Springsteen's fame validated by the state ("Governor" n.p.).

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[63] Collinson uses the work of Raymond Williams to distinguish two kinds of political artists, "aligned songwriters who map the political environment of their time and place; and committed songwriters who try to change it" (71).

Rather than an exploration of his own career – which could be considered emblematic of neoliberalism's promises – I am instead interested in him for his cultural status. Springsteen's work has generated significant critical attention, perhaps more than any living musician. The exceptional status afforded to the rocker's decades of work is evidenced by the establishment of a *Biannual Online journal of Springsteen Studies*, a title that epitomizes the cult of personality around the rockstar with its cringe-worthy abbreviation: *BOSS*. Springsteen is not only ubiquitous, but he is also consistently approached as an embodiment of the U.S.A. and of working-class masculinity. Springsteen scholarship routinely positions him in relation to the national imaginary of the United States of America, as "an American iconic pop figure" (Moss 343). Even the terms Springsteen uses to describe his own work echo the language of nation within Anderson's *Imagined Communities*; as Springsteen said in an interview "I set out to find an audience that would be a reflection of some imagined community that I had in my head, that lived according to the values in my music and shared a similar set of ideals" (Springsteen qtd in Streight and Harde 10). As Will Straw suggests, music criticism of the 1970s (largely responsible for Springsteen's fame) was highly biased toward "basic generic structures and links to the archive of American popular music," as the "individual career or genre [was] the context within which records were evaluated" (113); Springsteen's work is pre-packaged for legendary status within such a taste culture.

Accordingly, the ready-to-hand themes that swirl around "American" identity have dominated critical approaches to Springsteen's music. Robert P. McParland's "Facing the Music: The Poetics of Bruce Springsteen" describes Springsteen in terms that exemplify many critics' approaches to his music: "his catalog is full of America"; he "draws upon the voice of the people" like Wordsworth; "Springsteen tells us stories of our lives"; and he "embodies the legacy of rock" (McParland 233). The effect of positioning Springsteen as musician-poet of "The American Dream" produces the most obvious cliches ("the working man endures relentless struggle" and "These are the jobs and the people Springsteen writes about: common Americans with uncommon spirits") as well as a repeated questioning – but never a rejection of – "The American Dream" (McParland 238). Yet it is perhaps in the association with the city[64] that Springsteen's symbolic role within scholarship is best captured. In the latter quotation, McParland cinches

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[64] "From New York came a voice and song, flesh and blood and dream that went out across the country, out across the world" (McParland 233).

Springsteen to the national imaginary through the myth of NYC and its global reach, a particularly powerful knot of discourses that has the ironic result of transforming songs about depressed life in the dilapidated towns of the U.S.A. into the commodities of cultural imperialism. Carl Rhodes provides another example of this approach, one which valorizes Springsteen by arguing that:

> In looking at the content of Springsteen's songs, one finds a sustained discussion of the relationship between the utopianism of the 'American Dream' and the hard realities of the lived experience of working life. For Springsteen the task is not to resolve this problematic relationship but rather to deal with its actuality (Rhodes 6).

This framing distances Springsteen from the producers of nationalist propaganda, while simultaneously reinforcing nationalist discourses and the symbolic hold of the discourses themselves; taken together, this framing secures Springsteen's place within the cultural mainstream without challenging the categories by which the mainstream is constituted. For many critics this leads to affirming Springsteen's work as a resistant force. For Rhodes this is specifically linked to the way Springsteen's lyrics disenchant "the promises of economic freedom through capitalism" and Rhodes uses Springsteen as a counter-argument to business management advice from the period (1; 2). The forms of utopianism present in those texts are absent from Springsteen's songs on work.

In a dynamic reminiscent of 1990s cultural studies, much scholarship on Springsteen oscillates in its approach: between resistance and complicity, between ideological reinforcement and challenge, between critical attention to his contradictions and hagiographic exultation of his virtues. While the E Street Band is often drawn into the critical argument, much of the focus is on Springsteen's persona, his writerly or literary identity, and his troubled entanglement with 'authenticity'. The exemplar is the 2012 collection of essays *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream* which "pit[s] Springsteen's brash populism against the songwriter's own misgivings about the capacity of the American Dream to make a genuine difference amongst a nation drowning in the waters of its own materialism and greed" (Womack et al. 3). If this suggests the flaws in the fantasy of romantic satisfaction, home ownership, and regular employment, it nevertheless keeps the discourse surrounding Springsteen in its orbit. Partly this is underpinned by Springsteen's own image, which as Ian Collinson argues has evolved into that of "an angry patriot" who "remains a subscriber to and an

embodiment of many normative American [sic] values" (Collinson 71). Springsteen's masculinity is among these.

While Springsteen is often heralded for progressive values, particularly in depicting his lovers as inter-racial, his embodiment of a stereotypical masculinity for the U.S.A. has drawn extensive critique. Gareth Palmer's "Bruce Springsteen and Masculinity" from *Sexing the Groove* positions him as "a dominant force in promoting and signifying masculinity" (101) who performs as "a man striving for authentic masculinity" (101). Springsteen's work is contextualized in the wake of the "crises of masculinities" registered within the "combined disciplines of philosophy, anthropology, and cultural theory" since the 1970s (100). Linking academia to popular culture, Palmer goes on to cite Aerosmith and Bon Jovi's "hyper-macho posturing" as "evidence of a desperate attempt to assert the continuing validity of the externally rampant male in a world which has little need of him[65]" (100). Springsteen is distinguished from the other musical acts as a writer, and he is "modern" because he "allows a crack in the edifice of masculinity and reveals the new insecurity of male identity" (105). I hope to demonstrate that this insecurity is the result of a toxic articulation of gender and economy coming unraveled. Yet, as Straw points out, rock culture "both offers and draws upon a variety of male gender styles" (115); rather than being understood as a counter-argument to Palmer, I suggest that Straw's contention resituates an inquiry into masculinity in these musical contexts toward a concern with how various "gender styles" interact or are contrasted within a context of changing economy. Springsteen's own music demonstrates this, as its lyric subjects can hardly be reduced to the tropes of stereotypical masculinities yet are consistently positioned in relation to them.

Beyond Springsteen's embodiment of masculinity, feminist critiques often point out how women are situated as objects of male desire within his lyrics.[66] Ann Powers captures this contradiction in her article "The Limits of Loving The Boss" [2016] for *NPR*,

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[65] Palmer is astute about the cultural-political function of the ironic posturing that often renders these performances unserious: "The humour that accompanies these performances helps diffuse the criticism but fails to disguise the desire to reassert the dominant male of patriarchy" (100).

[66] In "Still Searching For the Promised Land: Placing Women in Bruce Springsteen's Lyrical Landscapes" Moss writes: "Women in Springsteen's lyrics appear most often as objects of sexual desire, obsession, or fantasy. Sometimes they appear as venerable objects, perched upon a pedestal, prepared to act as directed, and invoked when needed. Rarely are women speaking subjects, or subjects that act of their own volition; women, like the men themselves, are subject to men's desire." (Moss 347)

but points to the way this is underwritten by a typification in his characters: "clear roles — the questing man, the woman who accompanies and sometimes eludes him but doesn't direct things — offer comfortable catharsis" (Powers n.p.) Like Palmer, Powers writes it that is Springsteen's "literary style" that makes his depictions of women "special," and provided him with a way to push cultural politics further away from racial segregation in the 1970s and 80s. Powers observes: "Instead of the countless "babys" of The Beatles, Springsteen named his crushes: Sandy, Wendy, Mary, the same names that belonged to the women in his audience. Naming was another way Springsteen could realize his interracial vision — it's no accident that Rosalita and Maria were in there too" (Powers, n.p.). Intervening within romantic common sense, Springsteen nevertheless repeated the gendered tropes familiar to 1980s rock audiences.

The popular criticism is echoed in feminist academic work: Pamela Moss argues that the songs are underwritten by a masculine perspective that positions "man as subject" while "the lyrics function to hold women in place ontologically as men's facilitators of the Promised Land without claiming their own subjectivity" (Moss 347). Far from uniquely fitted to the romantic framework, Moss argues "No matter how the women are cast, empirically they remain as simple, flexible entities that fit neatly and securely into the trajectory of the subject positioning generated for men" (348). Moss observes that *The River* shifts Springsteen's approach to women, however: after "dashed dreams" of the promised land "men then look to a substitute for the dream and women become the compromise between that search and the attainment of the promised land" (184). Yet, at the risk of quibbling with Moss, it is not precisely *women* that substitute for the promised land, here: it is their necessity to the social form of the romantic couple. Indeed, as Moss argues, "women act as facilitators and sanctuaries for men during the quest for 'the good life'" becoming "impediments and scapegoats" (184) when that quest fails; but it is not just any "women" but *lovers* who are most commonly depicted this way.

These critics clearly illustrate that the language that Springsteen uses captures the contradictory ideology of the period, and as I suggest this includes the responses of working-class people to neoliberal restructuring. As Amiri Baraka argued in a 1985 article for *SPIN* magazine, Springsteen's early work is convincing both because he appropriated the "blues shouter's voice" – in the long tradition of white musicians relying on Black culture for their inspiration, what Eric Lott traces back to minstrelsy in *Love and Theft* – but also because of his lyrics: he is concerned with "a visible, living America with

its obvious flaws, a real world." While romantic love usually appears, within popular music, as lyrics from an unidentified "I" to an idealized "You[67]" – useful for inducing identification and cash from as broad an audience as possible – the continuity within and across Springsteen's songs gives the lyrics a world-building character. This is unusual for lyric love songs which usually focus their expressions of feeling on a dyadic relation between nearly anonymous subjects. As Baraka writes, singing from the perspective of "victims, lonely, broke, and hungry" gives these songs a political character that stands in stark contrast to the masculine patriotic identity layered onto him by industry executives, the *homo oeconomicuses* that Baraka calls "dollar sniffers" in a later version of the *SPIN* essay (*Digging* 86). Springsteen's lyrics are, as Baraka writes, more "reaction" than "critique," and this is exemplified in the contradictory treatment of romantic love within his lyrics.

Dry Rivers: Romantic Escape in the Ruins of Fordism

While some Springsteen tracks affectively challenge the promises of romance (e.g. in "The River"), romantic love is nonetheless upheld within these songs. The roles of romantic love and its couple include an expression of freedom and means to escape the dead-end life ("Thunder Road"), a means to ease the burden of working-class life ("Two Hearts") or as a barrier against the hostility of the social ("Cover Me"). Reading across Springsteen's songs shows the way that one romantic fantasy's disappointment – that of Fordism – evolves with the conditions of de-industrialization and subsequent neoliberalization of the U.S.A. The failures of love do not undercut its social appeal: the unhappy relations are detailed, while the hopeful ones are generalized. Despite the contradiction, there is an extent to which the disappointments can always be understood as personal, while the emotion of romantic love can be celebrated. Contradictions at this level – within a single body of work – demonstrate how the emotion of romantic love, and its attendant fantasies, cohere despite failing to describe the world. In the breakup songs, failure (of one couple) serves as inoculation against critique and subtends the desirability of the fantasy (since some must fail to reach it). Successes legitimate the

[67] This is one of Thomas Scheff's observations on the popular love song in *What's Love Got To Do With It? Emotions and Relationship in Popular Songs*.

effort undertaken to actualize the fantasy, reinforcing the form of the couple through fantasy.

Springsteen's lyric subjects consistently rework these masculine fantasies for their moment and their loves are infused with the vernacular of romance: its contradictions of freedom and obligation, its link of social form and subjective action and affect, and its life-directing importance[68]. This connection of feeling to social form is reflected in the lyrics, which commonly slot its romantic subjects into the discourse of family. Despite trading in the pleasures of romantic fantasy, these tracks also capture the widespread recognition that the normative fantasy ("the good life") does not deliver on its promises of security or stability. In the decade that precedes the earliest works considered in Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, the cultural practices of romantic love are already pervaded by the affective relation that her work focuses on. Cruel optimism is pervasive in Springsteen's music. Rhodes' reading of "The Promised Land" exemplifies this without using Berlant's critical term:

> On close listening, one can be left with the feeling that the naïveté, which expects the promise to come true, is replaced by a knowledge that, despite the evidence to the contrary, the belief is so ingrained, so central, that one must still believe and live with the inability of the belief to be fulfilled. (6)

Springsteen's work orbits this attachment to unfulfillable dreams, and this is the basis of both his normativity and his intervention into common sense. Berlant emphasizes the ways that capitalism, over the past forty years, has disorganized ordinary life, approaching "the ordinary from the vantage point of ongoing crisis" (8-9). Neoliberalization entails the abandonment of social expenditures and the loosening of restrictions on capital, both crucial background causes of this social and economic instability. Amid that disorganization, Berlant suggests that we return to cruelly optimistic attachments – such as romantic love – because despite their fantasies repeatedly failing to deliver, they still provide a regular structure to the "impasse" of the present.

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[68] For Ann Bliss the abandonment of this fantasy is tantamount to outsider status: Bliss identifies the "outsider" figure within Springsteen as one who has "no interest in working from nine to five, in marriage or in the dream of home ownership" (141). That is, the outsider has escaped the dominant ideology that frames "the good life" in these terms, yet as Bliss points out the figure is no less masculine or patriarchal in his attitudes.

The contradiction of impasse and attachment is the central axis of tension in Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band's "My Hometown," from the 1984 album *Born in the U.S.A.*. Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm argue that *Born in the U.S.A.* is a narrative of the transformation of white, male working-class identity in the 70s and 80s (Womack et al. 26), and this song highlights the shifts in community belonging that are part of those changes. In four verses, the lyrics tell the role of deindustrialization and racial violence in depleting small-town life of its idyllic character as the productive compromises of the post-war period ended[69]. The de-industrialization of the factory towns that Springsteen dramatizes in this song connects economic conditions to the social relations of the period, illustrating both the re-affirmation of the capitalist form of family and the erosion of other forms of belonging. The result is a common sense response to capital flight by working-class people: stick with your family and follow the jobs.

In the scene of a small town, the first verse evokes a nostalgic memory as the subject recalls his time as a child running to a bus stop to buy a newspaper for his father before being given a tour of town in the car. As the chorus signals his belonging, it is conferred as part of a parental bond: "Son, this is your hometown". This nostalgic tone recruits listeners as participants in this view of the post-war period: the first verse is the stuff of the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Leave It to Beaver* that establishes a masculine sociality audible in much of Springsteen's music. Springsteen sings from the perspective of working-class white men, capturing their desires and their disappointments. However, the song's founding nostalgic moment is troubled by the second verse: "in '65 tensions were running high" at school, where racial violence is ambiguously presented as "a lot of fights / between the black [sic] and white." As Ken from the *E Street Shuffle* fan blog documents through newspaper research[70], Springsteen's hometown – but not his high

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[69] The different aspects of the post-war period's compromises are emphasised in its three common terms, which are neither congruent nor entirely distinct from one another: The Keynesian compromise, named for the British economist John Maynard Keynes whose economic theories underpinned it, highlights an economic mode of governance: the management of business cycles to continue redistribution (downward) while encouraging a growing capitalist economy. The Fordist compromise focuses on the way labour relations between employers and unions normalized growing wages in exchange for labour peace, removing the radical potential of the union movement (e.g. worker ownership). The social democratic compromise instead emphasises the political aspect of the period, as the managerial classes generally aligned with the popular classes to forestall revolution in favour of gradual change.

[70] Writing on Springsteen is made easier by the extensive online repository of fan blogs containing research and historical background for nearly every track he has written. Including at

school – was the site of a white supremacist attack in 1969, and this likely inspired the track. But the subject is clearly not Springsteen, and these struggles are not one in which the song's subject takes part; rather, Springsteen focalizes an observer of the political who complains "there was nothing you could do." The powerlessness, a sign of a *lack* of political commitment, foreshadows the escalating violence and the political division modifies the chorus: "troubled times had come / to my hometown."

When the third verse turns to describe the economic institutions of "Main Street's white-washed windows and vacant stores," both the first verse's rosy nostalgia and the second verse's social antagonism are gone, replaced by images of capital flight and loss. Using the detail of a closing textile mill, Springsteen captures the larger story of the core industrial regions of the U.S.A.: "the foreman says these jobs are going, boys, and they ain't coming back / to your hometown." The words were no vague sentiment, and while they drew on a concrete moment, that moment would be repeated over and over again after the song was written:

> a year after 'My Hometown' was released, the 3M Company closed their factory in Freehold. During a benefit performance for the employees who had lost their jobs, Springsteen introduced the song by saying: "The marriage between a community and a company is a special thing that involves a special trust. What do you do after ten years or 20 years, you wake up in the morning and see your livelihood sailing away from you, leaving you standing on the dock? What happens when the jobs go away and the people remain?
>
> . . .
>
> What goes unmeasured is the price that unemployment inflicts on people's families, on their marriages, on the single mothers out there trying to raise their kids on their own. The 3M company: it's their money, it's their plant. But it's the 3M workers' jobs. I'm here to say that I think that after 25 years of service from a community, there is a debt owed to the 3M workers and to my hometown. (Springsteen qtd in Taysom n.p.)

Springsteen's claims – that 3M is violating his community's trust – are integrated with the identification of the worker with this "hometown." Routed through a romantic and family ideology that characterizes the period, using metaphors that compare 3M to a romantic

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least one in this chapter is a small way to acknowledge the massive amount of work – done out of passion and curiosity – that helped to inform this chapter.

partner abandoning their responsibilities, Springsteen here captures the alienation of production and social reproduction through restructuring.

While Springsteen's political message insists on the "debt" to the hometown, the worker's identification in the lyrics shifts its meaning when he must chase employment: the attachment to the town is maintained, but the family leaves. In the final verse, as the subject of the song considers "packing up our bags maybe heading south," his planned movement – taken in consultation with Kate (presumed marriage partner) – follows the same path that capital took in abandoning the industrialized northeast of the U.S.A. for cheaper land and labour. Springsteen embeds into a pop song how neoliberalization interrupted cycles of working-class social reproduction that had been essential to the post-war compromise. In "My Hometown," despite the material changes that have disorganized the subject's daily life, the one he felt was guaranteed under the previous set of economic conditions, he remains attached to the scene that produced his sense of belonging to the town. While Bliss reads this song as evidence that "Springsteen's fathers . . . have passed through boy and youth culture and emerged into a maturity that seems to depend on passing their accumulated wisdom on to their sons" (137)[71] I tend to read the final tour as a kind of powerless compensation for that ritual, a sign of the end of the cycle of social reproduction wherein the knowledge of the previous generation has been rendered useless by capitalism's continued revolutions in social life. While the narrator has grown up in the hometown, his son will not. Yet Bliss astutely observes the difference between the escape narrative of earlier tracks and this song: here it is "an image of a man lying in bed with his wife, making decisions together" which is "a far cry from the romance of running away in a shiny car like the couple do in 'Born to Run'" (Bliss 161). Liza Zitelli similarly reads this final image as a sign of maturity, of mutuality – it does not repeat the "father knows best" world that is sometimes depicted in Springsteen lyrics (171). Yet if this is maturity, it is maturity reflecting the dependence of working-class subjects on capital.

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[71] Bliss distinguishes individuals such as this lyric subject from "outsiders" in Springsteen's work. While "the quintessential American characteristic of individuality threaded throughout Springsteen's lyrics is practically synonymous with masculinity" (134) Bliss points out that the outsider is also positioned as male, with a different relation to the American Dream (133). He is an outsider (not an individual) because of his failure "to move through conventional phases of masculinity" (146). Where the family provides a structure for individual belonging – "embracing" the individual in Bliss' terms – the outsider has no such recognition (140).

To understand this as a relation of cruel optimism, we must recognize Berlant's crucial distinction between the "experience" of optimism, which varies, and how the "*affective* structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (2). That return is audible in "My Hometown" as the final tour of town given by the subject to his son, despite the economic changes that cause the family to leave[72]. Criticism of

Springsteen's masculine characters suggests Berlant's cruel optimism: Palmer writes "Springsteen's characters experience a despair that has no object to focus upon. They know that what they have isn't working but they don't know what to do to change things" (103). Yet this is a particularly gendered despair, as Palmer illustrates, located in the contradiction between the economic role of "breadwinner" and the freedom that powers "mythic masculinity" (104). Palmer's account is not primarily economic, though he opens by distinguishing "professional" and "blue-collar" masculinity; he concludes by dismissing the "old models" of masculinity because they are "useless" within "a rapidly transforming post-industrial world" (116). These are figures whose internalization of their social role has left them without a place, and Palmer recognizes the modality in which the father figure is emasculated in Springsteen's lyrics: as a proletarian, waiting for the bus ("Rosalita [Come Out Tonight]") or silently gazing at the homes of the rich ("Mansion on the Hill"), physically worn down and emotionally vacant ("The River"). Ann V. Bliss reads this differently, yet still highlights the grip of the fantasy: "The persistence of the working-class man in Springsteen's work and his apparent failure to progress socioeconomically imply that the pursuit of the Dream holds more importance than does attaining it" (Bliss 134). I instead suggest that this signals the failure of objective conditions to deliver on that dream despite the persistence of the ideology in shaping one's life psychically and practically.

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Palmer's reading proceeds through a set of types, three-stages of normative father-son relations that inhere Springsteen's work and are rendered tragic because "the son becomes disenchanted with the failure of his father to match the ideal. And although the ideal is eventually questioned it never loses its hold" (101). Palmer here points toward an irony within normative masculinity: it continually repeats this tragic – and cruelly optimistic – relation, yet it is interpreted as evidence of a crisis of the same masculinity. The "crisis" that is registered by scholars of masculinity might better be understood as the gendered refraction of neoliberalization. For men whose gender identity had become enmeshed with their economic role, this crisis is felt more acutely and is attended by an existential threat, one which strikes at the base and superstructure of industrial working-class masculinity simultaneously. For Springsteen's work, the twin roles of husband and worker are integral to masculinity in the U.S.A., and economy and romance shift together ("Downbound Train").

The nostalgia inhering that final tour remains after they migrate. Moving away is precisely what *National Review* contributor Kevin Williamson and self-described conservative prescribed for "these dysfunctional, downscale communities" in the 2016 article "Chaos in the Family, Chaos in the State: The White Working Class's Dysfunction." The article is largely an attack on the rural white supporters of then candidate for President of the U.S.A. Donald Trump; as Donald Trump's electoral successes illustrated, the same subjects rendered disposable by neoliberalism can be recruited to any number of political causes when promised a return to the era where their nostalgia is anchored. Reinforcing racial categories from title to conclusion, Williamson diagnoses the collapse of the traditional family, dismisses Springsteen's music as a fiction, and heaps scorn on poor (white) towns:

> Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible. Forget all your cheap theatrical Bruce Springsteen crap . . . they need real opportunity, which means that they need real change, which means that they need U-Haul. (n.p.)

There is an irony to using the author of the lyrics of "Born to Run" in this role, who wrote of another town "it's a death trap / it's a suicide rap / you gotta get out while you're young." Williamson could have quoted this line in his screed but in Williamson's view there were no dramatic changes to town life: "nothing happened to them . . . even the economic changes of the past few decades do very little to explain the dysfunction and

negligence – and the incomprehensible *malice* – of poor white America" (n.p.). Williamson illustrates the conservative moralism toward those who did not follow the work: if you do not work with the market, you become a morally bankrupt subject and you deserve what you get. History is irrelevant to these towns ("nothing happened to them") but poverty is immoral; anyone who is not willing to move, skill up, or become flexible is rendered disposable. Williamson diverges sharply with Springsteen's own contextualization of his work, exemplified in "My Hometown." Beyond lyrical content, Springsteen performed the song when raising awareness and cash for factory workers in the wake of closures. Hilburn reports that in the 1988 Amnesty International Human Rights Now! Tour, Springsteen introduced the song by linking homelessness and human rights, freedom, and responsibility:

> When you pass a homeless man or woman on the street, (those people's) human rights have been violated," he said, introducing "My Hometown," a call for civic responsibility and compassion. "Use your freedom to help others enjoy their freedoms. (Hilburn n.p.)

Crucially, Williamson does not note the dramatic revolutions in social and economic life in these communities, instead focusing on a town (Garbutt) that has been economically abandoned for decades.

The economic conditions that Springsteen brings forward and their causes — the de-industrialization of the formerly "core" manufacturing regions of the United States of America – have been understood by many Marxist theorists as either a system-wide response to the declining rate of profit after 1973 (Robert Brenner)[73] or part of a concerted political strategy to restore the conditions for capital accumulation (David Harvey). Both Harvey and Brenner agree that moving factories out of unionized regions drove down labour costs and transferred wealth to capitalists. As Harvey writes, of the 1980s, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism:*

[73] Brenner argues that the de-industrialization of the northeast and midwest (heavily unionized) were taken in response to the declining rate of profit after 1973, as "employer offensives" against labour began in the late 1970s (under "Keynesian" principles) before accelerating in the 1980s under monetarism (darling of neoliberal economist Milton Friedman) and continuing in the 1990s as budget balancing followed. Brenner defends this argument in "The Capitalist Economy, 19452000: A Reply to Konigs and to Panitch and Gindin," within *Varieties of Capitalism, Varieties of Approaches* and in longer form within *Political Economy of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005*.

> Transfer of industrial activity from the unionized north-east and midwest to the non-unionized and 'right-to-work' states of the south, if not beyond to Mexico and South-East Asia, became standard practice (subsidized by favourable taxation for new investment and aided by the shift in emphasis from production to finance as the centrepiece of capitalist class power). Deindustrialization of formerly unionized core industrial regions (the so called 'rust belt') disempowered labour. Corporations could threaten plant closures, and risk—and usually win—strikes when necessary. (53)

Brenner instead emphasizes that the Reagan Administration's attempts "to make the US the 'investment capital of the world' … brought devastation to the US industrial sector" while agreeing with Harvey that Reagan's policies transferred "a true mountain of wealth from working-class taxpayers to America's – and the rest of the world's – very rich" (234)[74]. When the rate or profit for manufacturing did revive, in the late 1980s, Brenner argues that a major cause was the "huge re-distribution of income from labor to capital, made possible by preventing any increase in the manufacturing real wage for the entire decade, as well as major tax breaks for corporations" (236).[75] If, as Brenner argues, it is "system-wide overcapacity in manufacturing" that has driven down the rate of profit since 1973, neoliberalism refused to address it. Instead, close collaboration between departments of the government of the U.S.A. orchestrated economic revival, including particularly the Treasury and Federal Reserve. Their decisions weakened working-class lives and possibilities by putting the cost of economic recovery onto the workers themselves.

Crucially, the economic restructuring that Springsteen captures, and that Brenner and Harvey analyze, also shifts the mode of production and social reproduction. Cindi Katz's "Vagabond Capitalism and the Necessity of Social Reproduction" highlights this relationship:

> The flip side of the withdrawal of public and corporate support for the social wage is a reliance on private means of securing and sustaining social reproduction—not just the uncompensated caring work of families, most

[74] While finance expanded in the 1980s, Brenner insists "the financial sector's profits as a percentage of total corporate profits were scarcely higher during the 1980s than in the 1970s and its rate of return fell sharply" (236). In Brenner's account, the financial sector would not truly become the centrepiece of capitalist class power until the 1990s, powered by the return of US manufacturing profitability (and continued financial deregulation).

[75] The other two factors Brenner highlights in returning manufacturing profitability in the U.S.A. are the devaluing of the dollar, which allowed producers to "impose lower prices and thereby increase profitability, while seizing market share from their competitors" internationally and the fall in long-term real interest rates (after two recessions drove down inflation) (236).

> commonly women, but also a shunting of responsibility, often geographically, that has clear class, race, and national components. (710)

With the costs of social reproduction offloaded onto individuals and families, the ideological and immediately available option for working-class was (and is) to turn to family. Springsteen captures this turn, which is precisely what neoliberalism's proponents would prescribe (whether in economic theories such as Gary Becker's *Treatise on the Family* or through economic incentives in policy changes to welfare). In the emerging compromise between neoliberal and new conservatives that would dominate electoral politics in the U.S.A. until the 21st century[76], the family was constructed as a central organizing feature as economic disparities grew.

Yet neoliberalism had to *re-emphasise* the family, as social movements from the 1960s forward – including feminism and sexual liberation – had challenged the centrality of marriage to social reproduction. This draws from the social value placed on romantic love, particularly within popular culture of the U.S.A.: Berlant writes in *Desire/Love* that "love and its intimate contexts come to bear the burden of establishing personal value generally" (102). "To love and to be loved" becomes a life-defining relation. The formation of the specifically capitalist form of family is consistently imagined as a voluntary bond between two subjects, formed out of love[77]. Love as the expression of freedom in the present, generating a promise of future social reproduction and stability: this is the ideology of romance as catalyst for family that was losing its hold by the 1980s.

Nowhere is the disappointment of the life-long marriage relation more clearly evoked than in Springsteen's "The River," which sets the cruel optimism for romantic love in its chorus and as its central organizing principle. "The River" is a sad tale from the first harmonica notes, setting the lyrics narrative of romantic and economic downturn as always lagging behind the music. That lagging formal relation between music and lyrics suggests not only that the story will explain the sadness, but also places the listener in a mode where emotional understanding precedes the cognitive. In terms that

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[76] Melinda Cooper's *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* makes this argument, highlighting the overlap between neoliberal economic goals and new conservative moral agendas that powered legislation such as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 which gutted welfare provision in the U.S.A..

[77] Elizabeth Povinelli's *Empire of Love* explores the way liberal political theorists imagined love as a basis for other relations (of subject and nation)

resonate with Berlant’s cruel optimism, Dave Marsh writes in *Two Hearts, the Story,* a biography of Springsteen, that: “On *The River*, no one is transcending anything; everybody’s too busy just trying to get on with their lives” (175); the song “The River” shows the consequences of that approach to life for one working-class man. As Moss points out, “’The River’ illustrates working class values and expected behaviours for women and men” (180). From its title track's first verse the song’s subject frames his life in common sense terms that invite an analysis in terms of social (re)production, as an industrial worker begins his story of lost work and evaporated love with the lines:

> I come from down in the valley
>
> where mister, when you're young
>
> they bring you up to do
>
> just like your Daddy done

over that mournful blues harmonica and Springsteen's tender crooning. In the first verse, the two lovers meet, in the second they marry, and the third shows the disappointment of the subject’s hopes as their relationship and his work does not fulfill its promise; in the bridge that follows this third verse, the subject finally revisits his memories of passion, which are “memories come back to haunt me” rather than comfort. Like "Your Hometown," this is a specifically masculine story. Unlike "My Hometown" there are no hints at a happy ending. In "The River" there is a kind of affective critique, implicit in the way each verse follows the normative prescription for love: from high school romance to marriage to work the subject does exactly what a working-class man is supposed to do, yet still finds himself “haunt[ed] like a curse” by memories of love, years later.

Springsteen’s lyrics, and the others I consider here, contest what sociologist Raewyn Connell terms “hegemonic masculinity,” adapted from Antonio Gramsci’s concept of political hegemony. Connell theorizes that “hegemonic masculinity” represents an ideal position toward which others must orient themselves, the accepted way of being a man that offers a contemporary legitimation for patriarchal relations. Connell’s formulation is particularly useful for this project’s focus on neoliberalization and culture since, by drawing on Gramsci, Connell keeps a focus on “the dynamics of structural change” while theorizing hegemony as “ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion” that can be supported by force. A hegemonic masculinity serves to unite a particular ideological formation around a representative figure who

functions to legitimate patriarchal social norms. Connell's work moves past the notions of "gender role" to argue that masculinity is a complex relational practice, implicating particular practices of femininity within patriarchal relations. Fordism's productive worker ("breadwinner") needs a "housewife," for example, this is not only out of a personal avoidance of housework, but because the life-world of that representative figure depends upon a source of unwaged labour for the duties of social (re)production at the daily level. Connell's theory is already framed in the terms of analysis for popular culture since the figures who represent hegemonic masculinity "express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires" rather than being embodied in real persons (Connell and Messerschmidt 831; 832; 838). The ideal patterns the practices of masculinity for actual men, so shifting conditions mean that patriarchal relations must be legitimated and reinstated, reproduced, and refashioned, to account for social change – neoliberalization has carried out just such a shift[78].

The critique in "The River" is deeply ambivalent, however: Springsteen simultaneously renders the subject a product of his time by pointing to the institutions that have determined his life (court, union, company) and, by evoking "the funereal tones of tragedy" (Berlant *Desire/Love* 89) suggests his own moral culpability in that process. Paul Nelson insists in his 1980 review of *The River* for *Rolling Stone* that the albums *Born to Run, Darkness on the Edge of Town,* and *The River* are best understood together, as a trilogy. Nelson points to the contrast between "Thunder Road" and "The River": "In 'The River,' there are no idle thoughts about how nice true love might be. Instead, fate and the new Depression shoot the working-class hero and his high-school sweetheart (Mary from "Thunder Road"?) straight between the eyes" (4). This is the disappointed temporality of romantic love, and it *requires* the separation of these moments. While "The River" does this within its verse structure, the earlier track better captures the grim euphoria of escapist love in lines such as "we're riding out tonight to case the promised land" ("Thunder Road"). Beyond an illustration of Fordism's common sense, these songs foreground an ideological contradiction. If this is normative love and

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[78] This observation follows scholars such as Stacy Denton, whose "Possibilities in a Neoliberal World: Masculine Authority and Love in Affliction" demonstrates how Connell's work is productive for cultural analysis. She argues that the family serves as a site for rural working-class white men to compensate for declining economic power, as ideals of masculinity shift toward the entrepreneur and away from the "brawn" associated with industrial workers like those focalized here.

life, then the consistent disappointment expressed in these tracks implicitly challenges the role of romance in that "moral-intimate-economic thing called the good life" that is the central object of Berlant's critique in *Cruel Optimism.* Or, less progressively, and following Berlant's *Desire/love*, we could say that they police the good life by illustrating subjects whose romances have failed to deliver on their promises.

The moral romantic love in the first verse is a youthful act of escape – they leave the valley, with its determination of their lives, and in the song's not-yet-tragic chorus "go down to the river," which will become the site of their love and symbol of love's rejuvenating power. The way the chorus offers a glimpse of their love but does not indulge that look sets up the memory that will be articulated in the bridge (and its voyeurism) as something that has to be drawn out of the subject, as it were under duress, like a trauma. If "trauma" is considered a shocking variance from the normative which inscribes itself in the subject, "The River" sets romantic love as formative trauma when it is disappointed.

Romantic love is formative in more than a psychological sense, however; that love, shown in the second verse's transition to adulthood, is the catalyst for securing the dual bases of life under capitalism as love and work: "for my 19th birthday I got a union card and a wedding coat." Their marriage is brought on by unplanned pregnancy evoked in the misogynist grammar that reduces women to objects of male action, while also referencing the rebounded consequences of that action: "I got Mary pregnant / and man that was all she wrote." Springsteen points out of the song toward the moral imperatives that govern sexuality and love in small-town U.S.A. These are precisely the "moral foundations" that neoliberals explicitly attempted to reinstate in the emphasis on family and personal responsibility[79]. The moral failure that the "unwed" pregnancy represents is reflected in the lack of social celebration of their wedding, which is a state affair:

> we went down to the courthouse
>
> and the judge put it all to rest
>
> no wedding day smiles, no walk down the aisle,

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[79] For an exploration of the importance of morals and markets to neoliberalism, particularly in the work of Friedrich Hayek, see Wendy Brown's *In The Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*.

no flowers, no wedding dress.

The repeated lack in these lines is not only an indication of poverty or thrift; it signifies a kind of disappointment, an affective lack. That lack is expressed in emotional terms, as well, and it suggests a once-in-a-lifetime disappointment of romantic fantasy that has been reduced by the state. What is missing from this state-run scene is the big wedding of the bourgeoisie; Springsteen's subject is disappointed because his fantasy is from "someone else's ideological universe," to borrow a phrase from Grossberg (*We Gotta Get Out of This Place* 91). Rather than the bourgeois' celebratory event, with its rituals of consumption, the judge settles the problem of the private moral failing (by rendering the relationship legitimate in the eyes of the state) and affectively cements the subject's future. Springsteen's usage of the language of the funeral, wherein a body is "laid to rest," illustrates the assumed finality of the marriage relation. Romantic love as an act of agency – their escape of sexual mores that takes them to the river – initiates a series of life-determining events for the subject which place him on a course he does not feel he can avoid.

Affective certainty does not stop the conditions of his life from being changed, and that shift is what marks neoliberalization. In the third verse, the regularity of his life is interrupted by economic downturn:

Lately there ain't been much work

on account of the economy

Now all them things that seemed so important

Well mister they vanished right into the air

The loss of work is explained by the nearly magical phrase "the economy" and its objective status, indexed to the common sense of the 20th century: economy is autonomous, economy is something discrete that can be distinguished from the social or political. Here, as Springsteen gets as close as he will to overt critique, he nearly quotes *The Communist Manifesto*'s first chapter. The passage he alludes to evokes the continuous remaking of life under capitalism as an affective experience:

> The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. . . Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting

> uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man [sic] is at last compelled to face with sober senses his [sic] real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

The communists of the 19th century recognized the affective dimension of capitalism's remaking of life (in part, through the concept of alienation). This passage continues to resonate with contemporary critiques of neoliberal capitalism, which has removed many of the restrictions on the disturbances of social life that were put in place by the social democratic compromise over the 20th century. But, too optimistically, the communists saw the evacuation of prior norms and traditions as a prompt for collective reckoning with the world as it was, leaving out (partly for polemical reasons in the *Manifesto*, no doubt) the role of ideology in crafting new fantasies and new attachments out of the remains of the old prejudices. More importantly for my focus on romantic love, they missed the importance of gender's differentiation to the (re)production of capitalist social relations. Springsteen's version of "the good life" is similarly approached from a masculine perspective that misses the importance of the work of social (re)production to daily life that his songs document.

Marxist-feminist theorists of social (re)production depart from Marx's thinking, arguing that *Capital*, especially, reduces reproduction to "the workers' consumption of the commodities their wages can buy and the work the production of these commodities requires," pointing out that this means "all that is needed to (re)produce labor power is commodity production and the market" and as Federici points out, this is the same formula as deployed in neoliberal schemas (Federici *Revolution at Point Zero* 93). Federici suggests that:

> Marx ignored women's reproductive labor because he remained wedded to a technologistic concept of revolution, where freedom comes through the machine, where the increase in the productivity of labor is assumed to be the material foundation for communism, and where the capitalist organization of work is viewed as the highest model of historical rationality, held up for every other form of production, including the reproduction of the workforce. *(Revolution at Point Zero* 95*)*

While the historical context of Marx's analysis of English manufacturing certainly contributes to the assumptions wrongfully made in *Capital*, a broader problem develops from this lack of attention. Federici argues that Marx "accepted the capitalist criteria for

what constitutes work"; this, for Federici, explains why "Marxist theorists have been unable to grasp the historic importance of the post-World War II women's revolt against reproductive work, as expressed in the Women's Liberation Movement, and have ignored its practical redefinition of what constitutes work" and "who is the working class"

(95). Contemporary social reproduction theory instead privileges "process," since "human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole," in contradistinction to a capitalist privileging of productive work (2). By moving beyond the emphasis on production, social reproduction approaches "totality as an organic whole rather than an aggregate of parts" (Bhattacharya 12) and considers how "categories of oppression (such as gender, race, and ableism [sic]) are coproduced in simultaneity with the production of surplus value" (Bhattacharya 14). This outlines why, for Nancy Fraser, social reproduction theory also means considering the supposedly "noneconomic" background conditions that capitalism relies on, such as care, affective labor, and subjectivation, which take place "outside" capitalism while being essential to the reproduction of its conditions (Fraser qtd in Bhattacharya 22-3). Approaching capitalism from a position of social reproduction means linking subjects to the totality of social relations. The Fordist family implies a masculinity oriented toward commitment (to family, to job), demanding (physical or mental) labour, and an emotional toughness often inculcating repression – what critics have observed in Springsteen's work.

Romance's temporality enables fantasies of elsewhere, an escape from the newly hostile social that has already lost its sociability in tracks like "My Hometown". "Cover Me," from *Born in the U.S.A.* captures the role of romantic love amid the denigrated status of "the social" in neoliberal common sense. The song's first lines situate love against, as escape from, a seemingly global historical brutality:

> The times are tough now, just getting' tougher
>
> This whole world is rough, it's just getting' rougher
>
> Cover me. Come on baby, cover me.

Whether as a blanket, a shield, or a partner-in-crime, Springsteen's subject wants protection. And as the song develops, the sense of competition that neoliberalism would embed within economic subjects is generalized: "the whole world is out there, just trying to score / I've seen enough don't wanna see anymore." Where the hometown offered a

place of belonging, and romantic love secured a place within it, this romantic love is based on turning away from the social, now recoded as hostile. Romantic love forms a relation of solidarity, but the relation is not one that can expand beyond two. Neoliberal ideology consistently de-emphasises collective belonging; within a denigrated social, the romantic couple serves a crucial purpose in providing belonging without risking larger bonds of solidarity.

As Butler and Athanasiou suggest in this chapter's epigraph, the power to nourish some lives while others are depleted and hollowed out is part of neoliberal governmentality: in their emphasis on the fantasies, pleasures, and visions of "one's own life" they draw attention to not only how neoliberalism causes harm or guarantees subjection, but also the way that the social reproduction of capitalism offers enjoyment to its subjects. Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* similarly focuses on the importance of fantasy as a way to organize a life, but distinguishes the desire for normativity – a sense of being held in the world – from "supremacist pleasure," a distinction that reclaims fantasy's openness. Ambivalence is crucial for an approach to romantic love because so much of what romantic love ideology homes – intimacy, sexuality, care – is fundamental to life, while its hegemonic form, the couple, is deeply alienating. Where the Fordist family had enacted that withdrawal by ideologically representing women's social role as wife and proscribing their movement within domestic space and a few complementary spaces, the dual-earner household amid neoliberal downturn refigures romantic love as fuel for waged labour. Economizing one's social relations transforms unwaged work otherwise done out of 'love' into the object of calculation; to the extent that these relations are homed in the family, the neoliberal subject enacts a counter-revolutionary politics at point zero[80].

As life-long marriage breaks down amid feminist refusal, and both divorce and post-divorce romance become more culturally acceptable, the supposed freedom offered in romantic relations is no longer the exclusive practice of youth. The agency expressed in romance remains limited to the romantic couple, however, and still oriented toward a heteronormative family. Continued cuts to social expenditures assign the family an increased role in providing for the activities of social (re)production that the state had formerly assumed as part of the Keynesian compromise. The songs I turn to next show

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[80] I use the term "point zero" here following Silvia Federici's *Revolution at Point Zero*.

how romantic love fits with an evolving ideological code of family[81] after the "breadwinner" and "home-maker" ideology of Fordism falls to feminist refusal and declining wages, shifting romantic love's role from catalyst to fuel for its determining structure, the couple (and its culmination in specifically capitalist forms of family).

Billy Bragg's 1986 album *Talking with The Taxman About Poetry*[82] is as concerned with love and economics as Springsteen, but with track titles such as "Ideology" and "There Is Power In A Union" Bragg's politics are overt. His folk-meets-punk aesthetics, grounded as they are in feminist influences and the campaigns against homophobia that he participated in, bridges the gap that had formed by the 1980s between unionism and youth culture. Like Springsteen, who played benefit concerts including Live Aid, Human Rights Now! and a string of performances for workers, Bragg's performance work was put to the cause of working-class resistance (though, for him, to Thatcherism). Bragg was a major force in organizing the "Red Wedge" movement of the 1980s. While ostensibly a youth-engagement program for the UK's beleaguered Labour Party, even housed within Labour HQ for a time, the cultural figures of Red Wedge were more militant than the Labour leadership. As Ian Winwood's "Why Billy Bragg and Red Wedge Failed to Make Labour Rock" captures, Paul Weller's centrality to the movement is illustrative of the distance kept between the musicians and the party's bureaucrats:

> Despite financing the tour's logistics – hotels, road crew, travel expenses – out of his own pocket, it was Paul Weller who remained its most uncertain participant throughout. 'There were only two alternatives as far as I see it,' he would later say in Walls Come Tumbling Down. 'One was armed revolution and the other [was] the ballot box. An armed revolution isn't that easy to organize, is it? Not in this country, anyway. So I guess you have to try it the other way – the supposedly democratic way.' Which was often messy. Prior to each night's concert, the performers appeared at public

[81] Dorothy Smith's work in "SNAF as Ideological Code" from *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory, and Investigations* points to the similarity of the 1980s norm of family with the earlier Fordist ideal while pointing out its ideological character. Smith's description recognizes the mutation in the Fordist ideal: now the ideological code includes a dual-earner model, while retaining the feminization of social reproductive duties. Compared to the family wage, this is simply more work for everyone, but the difference between that model and the description of the dual-earner household captures the gendered distribution of this abject work.

[82] Bragg's album title comes from a poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky, which is reproduced in English translation (by Peter Tempest) on the album sleeve.

> events with politicians who Weller described as being 'more showbiz than the groups.'

The disenchantment this led to, particularly for Weller, signals the disappointment that working-class movements writ large faced during the height of neoliberalization. Determined by abstractions they could not combat, these movements were largely appropriated by the rightward-moving Labour party (or, in the U.S.A., the Democratic Party). Bragg's most overt political involvement was in opposition to neoliberalism, yet like the Style Council (of which Weller was a part) Bragg brought together multiple traditions of protest music. As Martin Power and Aileen Dillane observe, in "Transcending the Moment: Ideology and Billy Bragg," Bragg "performs protest songs that cleverly draw upon musical forms underpinning his positioning as a voice of, and for, the ordinary person, ultimately disenfranchised by governmental adherence to neoliberal policies" (491). That characterization of Bragg's music is partly drawn from his support of the Miner's strikes in 1984, but he is no less political when addressing romance.

"The Marriage," track three of *Talking to the Taxman About Poetry*, critiques the politics of family in the name of personal freedom but layers that critique with an awareness of the economic and cultural pressures – neoliberals might say incentives – to marry. The song's subject is a man whose lover wants him to marry, and in three verses he explains his hesitance before finally relenting. The song's short refrain, "love is just a moment of giving / marriage is when we admit our parents were right" ends each of three verses, anchoring the song's meditation on the social form of marriage. In doing so, Bragg politicizes marriage in the name of autonomy, where the conservative character of marriage is the object of a critique of parental control (reflecting the broader politics of Rock in the 1980s, as I have already suggested via the work of Grossberg). But the plummeting marriage rates in England and Wales (after 1972) suggest not a dissolution of the couple – nor does Bragg challenge the couple-form in this song – but rather a turn toward excluding the church and state from the romantic relation. Yet the resistance in the song is overcome – the song performs the delay in marriage that characterizes the period[83]. The voluntary nature of the relationship – "Love is just a

[83] Dr. James Tucker, Head of Health and Life Events Analysis for the UK's Office of National Statistics suggests that the decline in marriage rates since 1972 (which in 2019 represented a 50% decrease) "is a likely consequence of increasing numbers of men and women delaying marriage, or couples choosing to live together rather than marry, either as a precursor to marriage or as an alternative."

moment of giving" – is threatened by state sanction and the bureaucracy that appends to marriage, taxation, and divorce, but what Bragg highlights are the cultural pressures on lovers to marry. Questioning Christian regulation of sexuality – "what makes our love a sin" – Bragg repeatedly implicates consumer culture in the marriage process, first in calling into question the social magic of "that bloody, bloody ring" to absolve the lovers.

Pointing to the embedding of the cultural in the economic, Bragg's criticism is taken further in the third verse. The external pressure to marry is an economic pressure: "those glossy catalogues of couples / are cashing in on happiness again and again." Distinct from the poverty that characterizes the marriage on "The River," yet suggested by the album's cover, it is the corporation that extracts the surplus of romantic love. Romantic love's practices are economic not only in the way that they index shifts in the work of social (re)production, but also in the way that romance produces subjects "simultaneously primed for conventional intimacy and profit-generating relations to consumption and labour" (Berlant *Desire/Love* 109). Yet, as consumption is linked to marriage from an economic critique, Bragg's lyric subject's own recognition that love is a moment of giving rebounds upon him, and he relents: "so drag me to the altar / and I'll make my sacrifice." Despite the subject's overt and layered critique of marriage, the fact that his lover wants to marry turns his own understanding of love – as a moment of giving – into a reason to marry. To secure that social relation he knows he must marry. The religious imagery that dominates the song overcomes the political objection to marriage: cultural inclination, secured through the articulation of church and corporate ideology, determines subjective action.

The marriage ritual Bragg critiques is implicated in Springsteen's work, yet it is the cover of the album *The River* where marriage's commodification is overt. The image's layering of nationalism and romantic ritual situates the imaginary of working-class people, and the material practices of social reproduction, as embedded in capitalist production and hetero-normativity. The lyric subject of "The Marriage" directs his critique at this form of marriage, precisely by observing the way such rituals of consumption realize profit for capitalists. In the ritual its commodities imply, the scene and the album suggest Friedrich Engels' criticism from *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*:

> The same 'natural' varnish covers up all 'national' representations: the big wedding of the bourgeoisie, which originates in a class ritual (the display and consumption of wealth), can bear no relation to the economic status of the lower middle-class: but through the press, the news, and literature, it slowly becomes the very norm as dreamed, though not actually lived, of the petit-bourgeois couple. The bourgeoisie is constantly absorbing into its ideology a whole section of humanity which does not have its basic status and cannot live up to it except in imagination, that is, at the cost of an immobilization and an impoverishment of consciousness.

More than 100 years after Engels, the working-classes may not have been entirely absorbed into bourgeois ideology, but in the practices of family we were certainly being shaped by bourgeois ideology.[84] Working-class relations of romantic love were situated as catalyst for life-long marriage within the post-war compromise, as the bread-winner and home-maker model of family would become economically fixed in the commodity of the family wage.

The family wage, and its organization of the unwaged, is crucial for understanding capitalism as a social order rather than a set of economic relations (wage, generalized commodity production, private ownership of the means of production, etc). As Cooper insists in *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, the Fordist family wage normalized gender and sexual relationships while organizing labor, race, and class, privileging white male industrial workers; at the same time, the formation of neoliberalism was no less concerned with the family (Cooper 8). Regulating this relationship was a partnership between capitalist employment and the

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[84] The 19th British labour movement, in a conservative turn, had rejected the integration of women into leadership, instead taking up the "breadwinner" and "home-maker" model of marriage in negotiations with employers. As Wally Seccombe argues in "Patriarchy Stabilized: The Construction of the Male Breadwinner Wage Norm in Nineteenth-century Britain," the conception of women as belonging in the home was not only a change from the 18th century, but it would operate as "a powerful ideological fixture in the labour movement for over a century, despite the fact that it was never realizable by the labouring poor" (55). Seccombe traces the origin of breadwinner sentiments among the working class to artisan families, solidified by the craft unions. Seccombe cites Edith Abbott's *Women in Industry: a Study in American Economic History* [1910], which documents a similar transformation in attitude over the same period in the United States, highlighting the increased profits imagined by economic pamphleteers when writing of women's labour (321). Abbott's writing not only captures the transformation of production by capitalism's industrialization in the U.S.A., but also points out that pamphleteers in the 18th century noted the increased surplus that could be extracted from women, and the economic basis of arguments for women's employment in terms of wage differentials: "Here was a fund of labor from which a larger return could be obtained if it were employed in manufacturing industries, and they made precise computations as to just how much that gain would be" (321). Here, the gender differential is normalized through the commodity of labour-power, embedding patriarchal valuation in capitalist production.

state, particularly in the U.S.A., where welfare benefits were based on employment status in a largely private-sector economy meaning that the “social safety net” always privileged white working men (Cooper 33). To keep a regular job in one of these privileged positions meant also to ensure compliance at home. Part of that compliance was ensured by regulating the make-up of the family itself, through narrowly limiting who could marry whom: whiteness is normalized (and racial categories reinforced) by bans on inter-racial marriage, while sexuality *and* gender are regulated through the articulation of monogamy and compulsory heterosexuality. Normativity was, at first, enforced via surveillance, as in the case of the pay raises that accompanied Ford jobs: these came with investigation by Ford's “Sociological Department” to ensure that families lived within social norms, excluding non-nuclear family structures and queers (Kipnis 194). The role of ensuring normative behaviour is reflected within popular culture as a family responsibility that falls to the father; Springsteen’s catalogue is full of challenges to this figure[85] while the "father knows best” TV shows of the late 20th century illustrate his ubiquity[86]. The privileges this arrangement grants to men are thus culturally, economically, and socially reinforced.

A subjective shift – determined by feminist refusal – appears in the relation of masculine subjects to gendered norms of housework after the break-down (or breakup) of the Fordist compromise. This shift is figured explicitly on the Billy Bragg track "Honey I’m a Big Boy Now". Bragg’s subject, another disappointed lover, illustrates the transatlantic character not only of neoliberalism (documented so clearly by Daniel Stedman Jones in *Masters of the Universe*) but also the feminist refusal of unwaged housework. The song describes a home where the work of social (re)production is left undone:

> The gloomy living room really needs a dust and broom but I can’t brush your memory away.

The pathetic fallacy – the subject’s projection of his feelings onto the home – reflects the gendered character of care-work in its absence, but also evokes the disappointment of the domestic fantasy. As “the family wage” withers, yet romantic fantasy is still informed

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[85] “Growing Up” and “Independence Day” each challenge the reproduction of expected social norms within the family by staging father-son conflict.

[86] Thanks to Stephen Collis for this observation.

by the Fordist division of the two "hidden abodes[87]" of production and (re)production for its salience, the economic and cultural politics that had held up the “breadwinner-homemaker” model of family are commonly understood as manifestly inadequate or at least under existential threat.

Where this working-class man might have fantasized about returning to a welcoming place of rest and love and sexual plenitude, instead he only finds more work. While the cuts to social reproduction in this period have far deeper effects than undone housework, the song highlights the link between romance and the work of the home, between emotion and everyday economy, and implicates a nostalgic past of plenitude. Like the subject of “The River,” this character is unable to forget his previous lover, but Bragg offers an explanation based in this subject’s own behavior:

> She would wash and cook and clean
>
> and all the other things between
>
> and like a fool I just sat there and let her.

What this song signals – beyond the endurance of the gendered character of housework– is a recognition by masculine subjects that the gendered division of unwaged social (re)productive labour is not only unfair, but degrading to the romance it is supposed to sustain. Such an admission is absent from Springsteen.

In an earlier decade, the division of work that this track’s lyrics capture would be entirely normative: now, it is the cause of breakup. The reversal of the home from a place of love to a place of undone work reflects the dissolution of a certain kind of romantic ideology – that is, the work appears as work, as romantic love registers its economic character belatedly, after breakup[88]. The lack of unwaged work in the home

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[87] Karl Marx referred to the space of industrial production as a “hidden abode,” a phrase taken up by Wally Seccombe in “Patriarchy Stabilized: The Construction of the Male Breadwinner Wage Norm in Nineteenth-Century Britain” [1986] to describe the household. More recently, Amy De’Ath’s work takes up this phrase to point out the link between social reproduction and value in “Hidden Abodes and Inner Bonds: Literary Study and Marxist Criticism,” emphasising that the production of gender serves as one of the necessary “differentials” for capitalist social (re)production. As these songs illustrate, that differential is partly secured through the cultural politics of romantic love, which link care-work to gender.

[88] Kathi Weeks’ “Down With Love” attributes the general shift to seeing housework as work to Marxist-feminist critiques from the 1970s. Federici’s pamphlet, “Wages Against Housework,” had insisted: “they say it is love, we say it is unwaged work.”

forces a change in subjectivity, but not the full assumption of home-making duties. This is one way to read the song's chorus, which relies on the transference of care-work from mother to lover that Fordist families demand of women for its sardonic appeal: \

> Now I can feed and dress and wash myself
>
> I can sleep without the light on
>
> Honey I'm a big boy now

Bragg might be suggesting, in a campy way, that working-class men must grow up in the wake of feminist refusal. But the verses show that this subject is incapable of fulfilling the ideal of home that his lover worked to provide; there has been no additional support provided, it is now his personal responsibility. The figure of a man complaining of undone housework now renders him childish, not a full subject, but reliant on the work of his lover.

Springsteen and Bragg exemplify the way critiques of neoliberalism (though not with that name) suffuse different forms of music during this period, when neoliberalization could hardly be felt as a generic concern. Yet while a generalized anger at neoliberal governance – however captured within the music – characterizes working-class bands of the period, the turn to romance rather than resistance is even more prominent. Evoking the changed reality for working-class men and their increasing recognition of their dependence on the work of women, the 1986 Bon Jovi song "Livin' On A Prayer[89]," exemplifies this shift in romantic ideology amid neoliberalization. Rather than romantic disappointment as an index of economic shifts, as in Bragg and Springsteen, here romantic fantasy is offered as a compensation for ongoing economic downturn. Ironically, the song prescribes hard work and dedication to one's job as a tactic for romantic survival for women while illustrating the betrayal of the promise of economic improvement through work for men. Yet in both cases, work is articulated with romantic love.

The song prefigures Kathi Weeks' argument in "Down with Love," where she suggests that literature on happiness at work runs a contradictory operation on romance: "Love and happiness are at once indexed to and detached from their traditional location

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[89] From the album *Slippery When Wet.*

in the romantic couple and the nuclear heteropatriarchal family so that they can be realigned with waged work" (41). For Bon Jovi, love links the couple and work rather than replacing the couple with work. Tommy and Gina, the song's two characters, work jobs that map the gendered division of Fordist waged labour in its dissolution: he "used to work on the docks" but is "down on his luck" because "the union's been on strike." A union strike, which before neoliberalization would have normally been an offensive for the workers (e.g. demanding better pay) is only comprehensible as bad luck during neoliberalization. The class struggle that union strikes could represent within popular culture is reduced to a cause for working-class hardship, reflecting the broader loss of collective politics (a central part of neoliberal ideology) at the same time as it decorates the track with a working-class veneer. This external detail – the union strike – is backdrop for the song's emphasis on love's sustaining power, which refits the feminine character of romantic love to motivate waged work:

> Gina works the diner all day
>
> working for her man she brings home her pay
>
> for love, ooh, for love.

The motivation for waged work is explicitly love, and the boss is not really the boss: she does not work for "the man," the idiom linking authority to its masculine embodiment, but rather love is, in the form of Tommy, "her man." Instead of the unwaged work of social (re)production, now the ideology of love drives women into a closer relationship to waged work. The job is hard, but love makes it worth it:

> Gina dreams of running away
>
> She cries in the night
>
> Tommy whispers 'baby it's okay'

The job Gina works at the diner is among those service-sector jobs that were exempted from the minimum wage (by the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act), a provision that is still used in many states to set the minimum wage paid by an employer to a worker at $2.13 (my mother, who currently works as a server in Dothan, Alabama, earns this wage). Tips are supposed to make up the difference between the "server wage" and the minimum

wage, relieving capitalists of the cost of labour. Such jobs increased dramatically over the 1980s in the U.S.A.[90]

"We gotta hold on to what we got," the chorus's first line, links the cruel optimism for the diner job to that of love. The song's embrace of precarity articulates romance as what Povinelli terms a "secular religion" in *The Empire of Love*: the chorus' infamous "whoa-oh, livin' on a prayer" is subtended by the promise that the couple will be enough, and that the love of one other is substitute for any larger belonging (e.g. to "society"). The vagueness of the song's fantasy – "we'll make it I swear"– is not a flaw in its writing, rather it opens this story of working-class love outward to the audience, providing listeners with a container for projections of their own personal fantasy of 'making it'. As Berlant writes, "the heteronormative love plot is at its most ideological when it produces subjects who believe that their love story expresses their true, nuanced, and unique feelings, their own personal destiny" (*Desire/Love* 109). But the song points to the failure of neoliberalism's bootstrap ideology: the insistence that they will "make it" stands in opposition to the entire song's world: it is not a "dream" that they will reach – one they will into being as autological subjects – but it is a "prayer" to no one in particular, the sign of desperation. When these two characters appear again, on the 2000 Bon Jovi single "It's My Life," it is as part of the song's opening dedication: "this is for the ones who stood their ground / for Tommy and Gina, who never backed down." This allusion (a kind of fan-service) links the belief in love within the song's own faith in the individual to craft their own life, exemplifying the kind of exceptionalism that despises being "another face in the crowd."

Fast Cars: Escaping Romantic Fantasy

The *Encyclopedia of Great Popular Song Recordings* describes the exceptional character of Chapman's work in relation to her contemporaries: "Amidst the superficial glitz of mainstream pop music in 1988, Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car" hit with the impact

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[90] Brenner argues that this is further evidence of the decline of the US economy in the 1980s: "the growth of non-manufacturing productivity in these years fell to its lowest level for any comparable period during the whole of the twentieth century, while non-manufacturing real wages fell by no less than 10 percent. Had US employers been obliged to operate under the regulations imposed by unions and the state throughout most of Western Europe, which simply rule out the terribly low-paying service sector jobs that dominated the US employment expansion, the US economy would have experienced skyrocketing joblessness, not job creation" (236).

of a near-silent thunderbolt” (227). The song signalled, for the author of this entry, something about musical audiences: “the fact that such a record became a Top Ten pop hit . . . was a remarkably hopeful indication that when given a chance, listeners will embrace music with real substance” (227). Where Bon Jovi and Springsteen were enmeshed (though differently) in what Rasheedah Jenkins identifies as “the gross commercialism of music” in the 1980s, Chapman’s[91] “rise ran counter to this era of pop superstardom and its celebration of materialism and consumption” (Jenkins 342). Rather, Jenkins situates Chapman’s oeuvre as “rebel music” directed explicitly against the Reagan-era cuts to public provision in songs such as “Subcity” (342). The feminist politics of *Tracy Chapman* [1988] are a stark contrast with Chapman’s contemporaries, overtly political and male-dominated rap groups Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, and NWA (344). According to her *Contemporary Black Biography* entry she shared with these groups “an ambitious way with words and a desire to tell the stories of the American underclass” (40). Jenkins also positions Chapman within “a 1980s female led folk-revival, one that she helped to launch” (344), on “a continuum of Black women activists on the political front, such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Y. Davis, and Assata Shakur” and, as a kind of synthesis, a “folk-protest tradition of Odetta (a named musical inspiration), Nina Simone, Battie Mae Fikes, and Bernice Johnso Reagon whose songs of protests were aural sites of resistance during the 1960s Black liberation struggle” (345). Chapman shares with Springsteen a set of politically committed influences, but where Springsteen's explicit politics developed later in his career, Chapman’s were evident from the first album.

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[91] Maureen Mahon’s short entry for Chapman in *Oxford Music Online* describes Chapman’s early career in terms that capture her political commitment as well as the exceptional character of her career as a folk musician:

> “Raised in a working-class family, she began writing songs at the age of eight and honed her craft as a high-school and college student. While at Tufts University, she made a name for herself on Boston’s coffeehouse circuit. Her self-titled debut album was a popular and critical success with sales buoyed by her appearance on the globally televised Nelson Mandela 70th Birthday Tribute concert at Wembley Stadium in London in June 1988 . . . Spare and socially conscious, Chapman’s music contrasted with the amplified hard rock and synthesized pop that was popular in the late 1980s . . . The winner of four Grammy Awards, including Best New Artist in 1988, Chapman is a rare example of an African American woman maintaining a critically and commercially successful career in the mainstream recording industry while working outside of R&B and as an instrumentalist.” (Mahon n.p.)

Chapman's folk aesthetic contrasts markedly with the glamor and excess of Bon Jovi, and her style – both of attire and instrumentation – shares more with Bragg's punk-folk hybrid than folk musicians who pastiche traditional garb. Like the other musicians I consider, Chapman's background was firmly working-class, providing a lived perspective grounded in a politically-aware home[92]; her education enabled a broader perspective for her critiques of contemporary capitalism. Yet as a Black woman, Chapman was a rare exception to the white masculine figures who dominate(d) the folk genre (particularly in the U.S.A.); as a singer-songwriter on guitar, her presence challenged the racialization of musical genres[93]; and as a politically active musician, she challenged the depoliticized excess that characterized pop music in the late 80s and 90s. Jenkins positions Chapman's work within the contradictions of neoliberalization, though they do not use the term:

> While Black Americans were hit hardest by Reagan's backlash against small gains achieved during the Civil Rights movements, there was a segment of upwardly mobile Blacks who fled the fledgling urban centers en masse (346).

Chapman takes a critical attitude toward this embourgeoisement in the songs that Jenkins analyzes, and it is in her combined critique of romance and class ascendency that her work captured the aching hearts of working-class people.

Chapman's "Fast Car" [1988][94] is an immanent critique of the romantic fantasy as it is entwined with class ascendency, what Jenkins calls "a narrative tale that details deprivation and a longing for a better life" (344). Nigel Williamson, in Chapman's only

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[92] *Contemporary Black Biography*: "It might seem easy to assume that Chapman's bent toward political folk music came about after she entered the elite educational institutions to which she later gained admission. In fact, both her interest in politics and her attraction to the guitar began while she was still in Cleveland" (40).

[93] *Contemporary Black Biography* normalizes the whiteness of folk in Chapman's entry, which opens "With a unique style that combined folk music with an African American sensibility, singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman took the pop-music world by storm in 1988." (40)

[94] The song first appeared on the album *Tracy Chapman*, which sold more than 10 million copies and rocketed her to fame after her performance at concerts to celebrate the then-imprisoned Nelson Mandela's 70th Birthday. The album won three Grammys in 1989, and received critical and popular praise for its politics, its aspirations, and its no-nonsense styling. According to the Encyclopedia of Great Popular Song Recordings, the track debuted at #6 on the U.S.A.'s pop charts, spent a week at #1 in Canada & was #5 in England; the album spent a week at #1.

authorized biography – a short inclusion with the greatest hits album *Collection* [2001] – situated the song as:

> a sharply observed tale of hope for a better life. It's a powerful and moving performance, the infectious melody and jaunty rhythm juxtaposed dramatically with the seriousness of its message about the difficulties of breaking the cycle of deprivation (Williamson, n.p.)

Chapman's lyrics articulate the world-building potential of romantic fantasy – the "new world" that Guattari and Povinelli differently theorize – with a fantasy of upward class mobility. Capturing the temporality of romantic fantasy while disenchanting its promises, Chapman's song illustrates the way romantic relations become invested with political and social hope. At the same time, Chapman's song is grounded in a critical view of working-class fantasy and intervenes into the romantic ideology of its listeners.

Each verse develops the central concerns with love and work through the conflicts and negotiations required to sustain working-class life; while this song shares with "The River" a moment of love remembered, its "you" is not a third party, the witness to downturn, but the addressed lover. The song's lyric subject is a working-class woman who is "starting from zero, got nothing to lose." In the terms of Kristofferson's "Bobby McGee," this is freedom, and while the willingness to risk it all on a lover's escape to the city drives the song, the sense of narrowed possibility is what the subject hopes to escape. Romance is the way out, and like Springsteen's "Thunder Road" it is framed in the terms of exchange as Chapman sings "maybe we can make a deal / maybe together we can get somewhere." Romantic fantasy interrupts the temporality of this undesirable life: "we gotta make a decision / leave tonight or live and die this way." Love's capacity to, in Berlant's terms, "try a new incoherence" ("Properly Political Concept of Love") is crucial to the song's appeal.

Chapman's subject wants to leave small-town U.S.A., but it is also a change in work that she seeks, specifically from the unvalued work of social reproduction in the form of caring for her alcoholic father. The life-long marriage of this song is already pasttense, and rather than a cause for mourning this is cast as an expression of her mother's agency: "My Mama went off and left him / she wanted more from life than he could give." The song challenges the gendered distribution of labour that casts women as caring support-workers for men without moralizing or pity. From the perspective of this unwaged support worker, waged work is essential to a full life, it is a sign of

subjectivity: “you and I can both get jobs / and finally see what it means to be living.” But where work might offer access to “living” – or maybe it is the couple, the “you and I” that does so – it is in moments of love when “your arm felt nice wrapped ‘round my shoulder” that provide a sense of identity and being held in the world. Where the subject of “The River” has his love forced into marriage by the morals of his town, here love is a choice to be renewed – conditioned, surely, but nevertheless arcing toward liberation.

Nurturing the fantasy of normalcy reached via upward mobility at work, sustained by the belonging provided by moments of love, the chorus is one of the most poignant depictions of romance’s capacity to simplify life: being held in the car is enough, I am enough, your recognition is enough. When Chapman sings “I-I had the feeling that I belonged, I-I had a feeling I could be someone” the expansion of the syllable of the “I” feels like stretching out into one’s own place in the world, a comfort in the now that indexes the desire for normativity that Berlant figures as the necessity of fantasy. At first, the couple manages, since moving into the city does deliver on the hope for waged work, and the moment of belonging in the car (like that of diving into the river) repeats as “we go cruising to entertain ourselves.” But that fantasy of normativity is still indexed to the Fordist family and its ideal of domesticity, despite the couple’s separation from those conditions, yet this is already understood as a dual-earner arrangement: “you’ll find work and I’ll get promoted / we’ll move out of the shelter / Buy a bigger house and live in the suburbs.” The presence of the suburban fantasy interwoven with romantic love is precisely the dream of middle-class life, a withdrawal from the hostile social. Yet this dream is already tinged with a feminist working-class understanding of the conditions that are required to enact this fantasy. Here, subtly, Chapman’s larger political analysis is layered into the track’s fantasy of marriage: not breadwinner-homemaker, but dualearner – still a hope. Chapman’s analysis of the social situation in the U.S.A. in 1995 describes the political retrenchment that characterized neoliberalism, implicitly linking this to a critique of capitalism:

> Every form of positive change I would like to see occur seems to be happening much too slowly . . . And in so many ways in recent years I think we’ve made steps backwards actually. So much has happened to obscure the dialogue about race and about gender and discrimination in general, especially where those things touch on economics. (qtd in Cromelin n.p.)

This insight suggests the conflict between the identity-neutral economic subject and actual persons that I highlighted in my introduction, as well as situating Chapman within a constellation of artists naming and attempting to alter this situation.

The escape that she planned through romantic love relied upon more than the feeling of belonging: it relied upon her lover's participation in the work of social (re)production, so that she did not run away from the work of caring for her father only to find a longer double workday in the city. Like the subject of "The River," this hope is dashed, but not by *personal* economic downturn, since "I got a job that pays all our bills." Instead, it is the lover's response to unemployment and the new social situation, where "drinking late at the bar" evokes the return of the relation the subject wanted to escape. As Richard Cromelin wrote for the *Los Angeles Times*: "The 'Fast Car' of Tracy Chapman's 1988 debut hit was a seductive and desirable thing, but to the song's narrator it became a symbol of superficiality and avoidance, a vehicle in which her lover escaped commitment and responsibility." In the last phrase, Cromelin suggests the *work* that the fast car's driver escapes from (in the home) through his mobility. The alienation of the subject's lover from the family ends their relationship, which is framed in terms of belonging too much to "friends" and not enough to the reproduction of family relations.

Unlike the subject of "The River," however, Chapman's subject does not repress the memory of love, nor use it as a reason to remain in a toxic relationship by repeating the return to the scene of fantasy. Berlant, again:

> In scenarios of cruel optimism we are forced to suspend ordinary notions of repair and flourishing to ask whether the survival scenarios we attach to those affects weren't the problem in the first place. Knowing how to assess what's unraveling there is one way to measure the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment. (*Cruel Optimism 49).*

Repossessing the metaphor of the "fast car" and reversing the standard narrative of romantic abandonment, she recognizes the disappointment of her fantasy and tells her lover "I got no plans / I ain't goin' nowhere / so take your fast car and keep on driving," intervening in the material conditions of her life. The song concludes with not just one more chorus, but in an explicit challenge to the temporality embedded within the ideology of romantic love, it crosses the bridge one last time to dissolve the couple: "you gotta make a decision / leave tonight or live and die this way." That return to the singular pronoun, seemingly addressed to the subject's lover, is also a challenge to listeners to

re-evaluate their own relations, to re-negotiate their own fantasies. Berlant insists that the affective relations of cruel optimism are not something easily escaped, yet following Chapman and, perhaps, the dictum of Gayatri Spivak, audiences can engage in the productive practice of unsettling that comes with the "persistent critique of what one cannot not want" (qtd in Danius 42).

“Try Harder”: Market Subjectivity in the Dystopia of Mandatory Coupling

. . . in the modern United States, and the places its media forms influence, to different degrees, the fantasy world of romance is used normatively — as a rule that legislates the boundary between a legitimate and valuable mode of living/loving and all the others. The reduction of life’s legitimate possibility to one plot is the source of romantic love’s terrorizing, coercive, shaming, manipulative, or just diminishing effects — on the imagination as well as on practice.

Lauren Berlant

Desire/Love

...who is society? There is no such thing! There are only individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. ... There is no such thing as society. There is a living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate.

Margaret Thatcher

Interview with Woman’s Own

As the social vanishes from our ideas, speech, and experience, it vanishes from our visions of the future, both utopian and dystopian.

Wendy Brown

In the Ruins of Neoliberalism

My first chapter linked neoliberalization to a cultural shift in the relationship between romantic love and family – from catalyst to fuel – in the choruses of cruel optimism within popular love song lyrics in the 1980s. There, my emphasis was on the changes that economic shifts brought to working-class romantic love, as the Fordist family (breadwinner-homemaker) – socially challenged by feminist movement and economically depleted by neoliberal cuts – was revealed as an unreachable fantasy. Cultural imaginations of what romance could be – an outside to capitalism's immiserations, as one consistent relation within a changing world – serve in those songs to ameliorate the structural and personal cruelties of neoliberalization. In this chapter, I argue that once neoliberalism's ideas become more than theories underpinning the management of capitalism and its modes of governance materialize within contemporary culture, it becomes "social software" (Derksen 252) for romantic subjectivity. As economic common sense restructures cruel optimism toward a set of impossible romantic promises through a self-valorizing subject, love becomes another business cycle.

Three Dystopian Loves: *The Lobster, Never Let Me Go,* and *The Matrix*

Yet there is a long tradition of love exploding economic schema, love as an irrepressible social force struggling against the rationalization of life that underpins capitalism. The role of romantic love in recent dystopian cinema illustrates the mutations romantic common sense has undergone in the past twenty-five years. *The Matrix*[95] (1999), *Never Let Me Go*[96] (2010), and *The Lobster* (2015)[97] each situate love in

[95] Written and directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, *The Matrix* won four academy awards (for Best Film Editing, Sound, Sound Effects Editing, and Visual Effects) and won the British Academy Film Awards for Best Sound and Best Special Visual Effects at the British Academy Film Awards, while being nominated for another three (Best Cinematography, Editing and Production Design). Its two sequels were less critically successful, but the popularity of the film and its world led to both an animated series of shorts (*The Animatrix*) and a fourth film, *The Matrix Resurrections* in 2021.

[96] Directed by Mark Romanek, with a screenplay by Alex Garland, *Never Let Me Go* was nominated for six British Independent Film Awards (including best director) with Carey Mulligan winning Best Actress for her performance as Kathy.

[97] Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, and co-written by Lanthimos and Efthymis Fillippou, this international film (co-produced by teams from the UK, Ireland, France, and Greece) won a Jury Prize at the Cannes film festival in 2015, and was nominated for an Oscar for best original screenplay in 2017.

antagonistic relation to the governance of life on economic principles. Yet constellating a sociology of negative relations (Eva Illouz's *The End of Love*), theories of neoliberal subjectivity, and political theories of neoliberalism around the films I consider highlights their refraction of neoliberalism's contradictory imbrication with romantic love. Where the machines of *The Matrix* reduce human life to a power source, the human government of *Never Let Me Go* treats its clones as a source of organic tissues for the movie's normative subjects. In each, romantic relations oppose the misery of dystopia, yet the ideology of love that aligns with *The Matrix*'s revolutionary plot is disenchanted within the plot of *Never Let Me Go.* But romance is not only opposed to dystopia in recent cinema; particularly when middle-class subjects are focalized, romantic dystopia – rather than dystopian romance – highlights the pleasures available to neoliberal subjects. As I illustrate through an analysis of *The Lobster*, the structuring role of consumption is crucial to contemporary romantic subjectivity, and the movie's critique doubles with an ultimately cynical and anti-utopian criticism of revolution (figured through its Loners). Beginning with *The Lobster*, I argue that these movies – in strikingly different ways – show how our own neoliberal world is maintained and renewed by the practices of romantic love and the couple-form, practices that abandon the social or render it a space of romantic competition.

Wherever David (Colin Farrell) the film's main character is within the world of *The Lobster* (2015), he is being instructed and coerced into agreement with a mandatory ideology of coupling or an anti-solidaristic individualism. His romantic journey takes him to three discrete spaces within the film: beginning in The City, he visits The Hotel, and The Forest before returning in the film's final scenes to a diner on the outskirts of The City. The spatial grammar of the film is stage for criticism of contemporary social and romantic relations: In The City, the film's normative analogue to contemporary life, marriage is mandatory and police demand marriage certificates instead of other identification. The neoliberal re-tasking of the family as the site of social reproduction is literalized, here, as being in a couple is fundamental law. Yet *The Lobster* turns its satirical gaze equally toward bourgeois romance (in the form of The Hotel) and those who rebel against it (the "Loners" of The Forest). When a subject of The City is no longer in a couple – whether through death or breakup – they are collected, not by police, but by waiters who shuttle them in a van to The Hotel. This is David's fate within the first few moments of the film; as a university professor and architect, he is a normative subject to

focalize the exploration of The Hotel's middle-class romantic dystopia. David arrives with his brother, Bob the dog, who serves as a companion and visible reminder of the potential fate of guests of The Hotel. At this seaside resort, David and other singles have 45 days to find another partner or be turned into an animal of their choice. As part of their daily activities, they hunt the Loners, the singleton rebel residents of The Forest. These hunts are incentivized: to take down a Loner extends a guest's stay at The Hotel for a day.

After repeated mis-matches with other residents, and nearly out of time, David violently escapes, joining the Loners. This rebel life is the opposition to the official ideology of the couple, and life in The Forest at first seems to contrast with the precarity of The Hotel – as the Loner Leader (Léa Seydoux) informs David when he arrives, "you can be a Loner as long as you want." But the longer David is in Loner society, the more the world there seems to be a twisted mirror of The Hotel. He once again fails to fit in: he falls in love with another Loner, Short-Sighted Woman (Rachel Weisz, whose character is also the narrator) which prompts harsh punishment from the Loner Leader for violating the rules of The Forest – she blinds Short-Sighted Woman and this triggers yet another violent escape. The film ends ambiguously at a diner in The City, as David decides whether or not to blind himself to be like his lover.

Where *The Lobster* features a dystopian regime allegorizing middle-class romance, *Never Let Me Go* 's alternative world (set between the 1970s and 1990s) has cured most diseases by subjugating part of the population: clones whose organs are harvested for medical use. As a metaphor, the status of "clone" and functional reduction of the clones' lives to hosts for organs later to be extracted suggests a criticism of the British Welfare State, and its combination of the regularization of the life of the poor with their surveillance. This horrifying premise and its consequences are muted for the majority of the film, which instead is a retrospective account of boarding school life and young adult friendship between three clones at Hailsham: Tommy D. (Andrew Garfield), Kathy H. (Carey Mulligan) and Ruth (Keira Knightley). Mark Fisher's "Precarious Dystopias: *The Hunger Games, In Time,* and *Never Let Me Go*" writes that the film "is about the success of such ideological apparatuses in destroying even the thought of rebellion" (31). Fisher follows Louis Althusser by referring to the ideological state apparatus (ISA) of the school in his analysis of *Never Let Me Go*. In the film's Hailsham school, Althusser's analysis of ISAs is evident: "the *sine qua non* for the reproduction of

labour-power is the reproduction not only of its 'qualification', but also of its subjection to the dominant ideology or of the 'practise' of this ideology" (Althusser 52). As Fisher crucially observes, the clones' one hope, or so they believe, is to prove that they are in love and thus receive a "deferral" from organ harvesting. This rumour, left unverified until late in the film, motivates Tommy D. to spent years of his life producing artwork that might show his soul – and thus offer the material basis on which the school officials could determine if he really does love, really does deserve a deferral. But as he finds out, no such process exists. Love is not recognized by the state, does not validate their humanity, and has no political efficacy; romance is not only the object of what Lauren Berlant theorizes as cruel optimism, but it is an informal part of the normative operation of state power. By the end of the film, only Kathy H. survives. The final scene signals the end of her work as a "carer" for other clones in the harvesting process (euphemistically called "donors") and the begining of her own "donations," a process that she does not rebel against but meets with a partially-explored fantasy of reclaiming everything she has lost – including Tommy.

The role of romantic love in each of these films contrasts sharply with its role in Hollywood productions in the genre of dystopian thriller; exemplary in this regard is the science fiction film *The Matrix* (1999). The story of humans who resist their subjugation to ruthless machines through their immersion in the virtual reality of the matrix also extolls the power of love. In the film's climactic scene, as the hero Neo (Keanu Reeves) lies dead from ideological (but nonetheless lethal) bullet-wounds suffered in the matrix, Trinity (Carrie-Ann Moss) confesses her love for him. Trinity's love for Neo is proof that he is "the One," prophesied to overthrow the regime that has, until that point, turned the majority of human beings into power sources for its machines, suspended within a virtual reality and unable to experience "the real." That confession of love revives Neo, who can then defeat the Agents of the machines and turn to organizing the population toward revolution. The romantic plot dovetails perfectly with the revolutionary plot: love conquers all. The familiar Hollywood happy-ending re-enacts what Darko Suvin referred to in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* as "a descent into sentimentalism" or the subjugation of physics by ethics (31) but here it is precisely the expectation of romance which is delivered.

There is a centuries long history to this trope, and it is present *across genres*, in nearly every genre. In such conditions the romantic ending comes to reinforce the

essential role of romantic love to imaginations of "the good life." As the epigraph to this chapter from Berlant suggests, the ubiquity of love plots also has a dramatic series of negative effects on imaginations of contemporary life, which become organized around, if not obsessed with, romantic coupling. Romantic love becomes an answer for a number of contemporary cultural and philosophical concerns: afflicted by any of the valences of the postmodern loss of meaning, the romantic couple can become the one small t-truth within a world lacking larger narrative coherence. Or, for subjects disappointed by the inaccessibility of political change, the small-scale relations of love – two, or perhaps more – can be a site where utopia is crafted, obviating larger political projects (and, when these relations do not reach their utopic aspirations, the cultural forces that shape personal politics can be shunted onto persons in a way that compensates for the lack of accountability from political figures). From an economic perspective, the instability of work and the changing economic conditions of neoliberal capitalism can be ameliorated by the support provided within a romantic couple. In *Desire/Love,* Berlant connects the agency offered by a fetishized version of romantic love to the commodity-form specifically:

> Marx classically notes that the magical autonomy of the commodity form obscures the economic, social, and ideological relations that animate it in the process of its production: so, too, the mass cultural discourse of romance obscures, the way a fetish does, the relations between the hegemonic processes of collective life and what people typically imagine as love. People learn to identify with love the way they identify with commodities: the notions of personal autonomy, consent, choice, and fulfillment so powerful in love discourse seem to be the same as those promised by national capitalism. At the same time, romance is a vehicle for marketing heterosexuality as the very form of fantasy and also the normal context in which fantasy can be lived, *but not in a generic way: the heteronormative love plot is at its most ideological when it produces subjects who believe that their love story expresses their true, nuanced, and unique feelings, their own personal destiny*. (109; emphasis mine)

For neoliberal subjects, it is this customizability of romantic love – it's necessarily personal and seemingly self-created character – that aligns so well with both the modes of agency of neoliberal subjects. The political-economic imperative to return the work of social reproduction to the family is satisfied regardless of the content of the relationship. Love and the commodity have more in common than the way subjects identify with them: under neoliberal conditions, the two also share how they are accessed, as subjects seek their sustenance and their solace within markets.

An object of the film’s critique is the neoliberal antisociality of the 21st century, where the only alternative to mandatory coupling is anti-solidaristic individualism. This moment demonstrates what Ilić argues: the film’s critique does not offer a utopian impulse. She is incisively critical of the film’s dystopia for its lack of providing either an explanation for contemporary ills or any “image of a better state” (484). Rather than a way out the film offers “abysmal circles” (482): *The Lobster* is hell. No Loner challenges the abandonment of their comrade. While some care, emotionally, none care as an action. Rebellion is abandonment.

No rebellion is possible in *Never Let Me Go,* either. Rather than a hierarchical command, the movie instead depicts a social world in which common sense creates fear of the outside (of normative life). There is no alternative: leaving Hailsham and pursuing a life that might take another path than "completion" before middle-age is itself rendered an object of fear. This happens not only through rules of the school, but through the children themselves: harrowing stories of violent death outside Hailsham told by the children within the plot of *Never Let Me Go* (7.00) work to foreclose the potential of an outside to dystopia. Like the rumours of romantic deferrals, these are not official ideology.

Ilić‘s argument that *The Lobster* is fundamentally anti-utopian thus also applies to *Never Let Me Go*, as each film offers, at best, a nihilistic criticism of contemporary life through their bleak worlds. For *The Lobster,* its secondary object of critique is a particular kind of individualism – one self-situated as resistant to the ideology of the couple but nevertheless grounded in the same lack of solidarity. While the movie‘s focus is on courtship, consumed with the pursuit of comfort and "the good life," it does not offer an outside from which a utopian impulse might arise – rather, the potential "outside" (the Forest) is already colonized by individualists. Rather than politically radical warnings of future social relations, then, the film offers a grim picture of the contemporary, refracted through an alternative reality where social solidarity is absent, a fully neoliberal world.

Absent except, in a cynical twist, for the Loner Leader, who gets special favours from The Maid she will eventually betray – proof that the rebel‘s ideology is not only nonsensical, but self-interested. The very notion of rebellion is thus positioned as a facade for self-advancement through cultish conformity.

The dystopian genre these films belong to may have once been "a continuation of utopianism, rendered ineffective by ambiguity" as Martin Schäfer argued in 1979, but these movies resonate instead with the genre's anti-utopian political history. "The antiutopia has even been claimed by the enemies of all political hope", Schäfer wrote, and exemplified this claim with the dystopian novels *1984* by George Orwell and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (Schäfer 287). In each, as well as Orwell's *Animal Farm*, utopian aspirations turn to repression and crushing inequity, serving as cautionary tales against utopian aspirations.

Such an attitude characterizes contemporary dystopian cinema. In "Gherman's Anti-Aesthetic," Fredric Jameson offers a critical judgment of the contemporary condition of the genre: "Today, indeed, as a fundamental genre of the postmodern, dystopia, far from warning of apocalypse, has aestheticized it and transformed it into an object of consumption and satisfaction" (n.p.). These dystopias can be thrilling, beautiful, grim, or thought-provoking, but they are not to be taken seriously outside of their appearance as art, and certainly do not constitute or contribute to a political programme. The dystopia's mutation occurs amid what Jameson decries as "the unexpected restoration of the reign of beauty and its disreputable ideology, aesthetic philosophy" that functions as "existential support of universal commodification" (n.p.). Aesthetic appreciation of "the appearance of the commodity" registers the political problem of commitment to commodity society, or "the abandonment of the project to replace it with something else" (n.p.). Jameson's framework raises questions about the relationship between romantic love and the dystopian genre, as well as the relationship of a de-commodified social relation to the commodifying operations of capitalism.

The cultural obsession with coupling is satirized within *The Lobster* (2015), which leaves behind the Hollywood tropes of happy endings and romantic assurances and instead situates the search for romantic love as the basis of a dystopian society. Rather than the rumours of reprieve within *Never Let Me Go* (representing what Gramsci referred to as "common sense" as pure ideology and rendering romance tragically beautiful), the romantic couple within *The Lobster* is an explicit concern of the state, reproduced within an institution (The Hotel). Here, romantic love is the explicit concern of

what Althusser termed the ideological state apparatuses[98]. The family, emphasised within neoliberal capitalism as a unit of consumption and social reproduction, must be generationally reproduced outside itself. Where the family once normatively reproduced itself – for example through courtship rituals and the approval of patriarchal authority over marriage – *The Lobster* points to the importance of contemporary capital in mediating romantic bonds. Denied its exceptional character, romantic love is part of the film's dystopia.

The Lobster refracts the importance of normative romantic practices to contemporary neoliberalism through the consumerist focus of The Hotel, where the constant provision of services provides the seemingly ideal background to develop the intimate connections of romantic love. The film is critical of this connection between consumerism and love, since its focal relationship (David and Short-Sighted Woman) emerges in the midst of harsh difficulty, banned by social norms, within The Forest. But this does not stop the characters from fantasising about the pleasures of bourgeois life – baths, trips, and shopping. Their fantasies reflect the deep connection between romance and capitalism that Lauren Berlant details in *Desire/Love:*

> Capitalism could not thrive without an attention to and constant stimulation of desire, which means that the centrality of romance and sex to its persuasive strategies creates subjects simultaneously primed for conventional intimacy and profit-generating relations to consumption and labor. (108-9)

As desire seems natural – an effect of cultural hegemony – neoliberal romantic markets (that is, the dating applications and sites of consumption organized as markets) seem to spontaneously reply to the need for companionship produced by a fragmented social formation. Despite the feeling for subjects, the romantic market of *The Lobster* is not a "free" market, but is rather an intensely governed one. Set up and supported by the state, it has the same structure of public and private partnership: from the police who inspect marriage certificates in The City, to the waiters and other staff of The Hotel and

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[98] Althusser insisted that institutions were not ISAs, rather that ISAs are systems; they are distinguished from the repressive state apparatus by their functioning "*in overwhelmingly preponderant fashion on ideology*" despite their secondary reliance on repression (Althusser 86, emphasis in original). Stuart Hall in "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates" pointed out the conflation of the state and civil society that the term ISA carries out (100).

the time-limit they impose on "guests," the romantic market of *The Lobster* is produced through organized efforts that echo the construction of neoliberal markets by states.

The Prison-House of The Market

Through The Hotel's absurd policies, *The Lobster* captures the way contemporary middle-class romantic relations are structured by the activities of consumption. In The Hotel, the emphasis on freedom that characterizes neoliberal subjectivity is strictly limited; here, neoliberal governance is not concerned, in Foucault's terms, with "the conduct of conduct" alone, but rather operates as a carceral zone of exception in which Brown's "eminently governable" human capitals of neoliberalism can even be sacrificed – or rather, transformed – if they fail in their self-valorizing and stateenforced pursuit of a couple. Nearly all activity is structured to reinforce the importance of coupling, either in negative depictions of being single, or in special privileges (such as team sports) reserved for couples. The Hotel is emphatically bourgeois and intensely moralizing: entertainment includes didactic plays and sentimental love songs. Sexual satisfaction is alleged to decrease the motivation to partner, so brutal punishments for infractions such as masturbation are meted out in public. Rewards for romantic pursuit are similarly public, as couples are celebrated by applause from hotel staff and other guests before being upgraded to a double room and allowed to access team sports. If the trial run in a double room is successful, the lovers are transferred to nearby yachts to live for two weeks as their final relationship test. Temporary access to elite pleasures is the reward for successful coupling. This satire of what Amy Gahran refers to as "the relationship escalator" takes a compressed form, where the incentives are not only social celebration, but the pleasures of consumer culture. Activity at The Hotel structures romantic life within the longing for bourgeois status: club-style dining room, formallyattired staff, organized dances, golf course, hot tub. As Eva Illouz argues in *The End of Love: a Sociology of Negative Relations,* neoliberal sexuality is "a consumer project" (51) wherein "consumer culture has become the unconscious drive structuring sexuality" (52).

The Hotel draws the bourgeois romantic industries together to incentivize coupling: romance is situated within consumer culture. On one level, The Hotel formally represents the romantic market that Illouz describes: "Under the aegis of sexual freedom, heterosexual relationships have taken the form of a market— the direct

encounter of emotional and sexual supply with emotional and sexual demand" (16). Illouz clarifies that this is not a metaphoric market – rather, it is "the social form taken by sexual encounters that are driven by Internet technology and consumer culture" (17) and, as she clarifies in a footnote, neither are homosexual relationships exempt – just as The Hotel offers the option for homosexual relations, so too do dating applications and sites of consumption vie for gay dollars[99]. This expansion of heteronormativity to include homosexual relations is as often achieved through an extra setting (checking a box is self-elaborating your life) as it is through the creation of a separate service (the Grindr to Tinder).

In each case, this is an expansion of the market: what is a dating site but a romantic market? A market view of romance is a dramatic shift from a view of love as "a contractual relationship, freely entered, bound by ethical rules of commitment, yielding obvious returns and demanding long-term strategies and investment" (Illouz 22), where endings occur because of "a direct breakdown of relationships— alienation, reification, instrumentalization, exploitation" (23). Brown points out in *Undoing the Demos* that "neoliberal rationality disseminates *the model of the market* to all domains and activities – even where money is not at issue – and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors" (Brown 31). Money might not be tradeable for love, particularly since the morality that regulates neoliberal economization derives from and relies upon a Christian worldview that separates the two. Certainly this can render romantic love a fetishized outside to the fully economized world, casting neoliberal subjects' love as an exception to broader behaviour. For *homo oeconomicus,* whom Brown defines as "an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital, tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavors and ventures" (*Undoing the Demos* 10), romantic love could equally serve as the exception to the competitive drive or another achievement in the portfolio. Brown emphasises Foucault's distinction between neoliberalism's *homo oeconomicus* and that of classical liberalism as the difference between a subject of

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[99] See, for example, the 2007 Routledge book *Gay and Lesbian Tourism: The Essential Guide for Marketing* by Jeff Guaracino, which promises in its abstract "best case examples and practices" as well as "analysis and context that addresses some of the burning questions in this area, including the potential negative stakeholder reaction, and strategies to educate the local hospitality community."

exchange and the satisfaction of needs (classical) and one who is dedicated to competition and human capital enhancement (neoliberal).

The distinction between needs-meeting subjects and those driven by the personal version of infinite growth equally applies to the shift in attitude that Illouz captures within her work on the romantic market: constantly leveraging for improvement renders dating markets an opportunity to improve rather than the chance to meet a preset series of needs. In the older model of the Fordist family, the dating market was much smaller – given its reason for being was finding a breadwinner or home-maker to complement one's own objectified subjectivity *for life*. As Illouz writes, "Choice" and "uncertainty" are the twin experiences of sexual encounters organized as a market: "Choice is the trope of selfhood linking freedom to the economic and emotional realms, it is the main modality of subjectivity in the consumer and sexual realms" (16). Illouz's "choice" refers to both "a certain organization of the world" and, as well, "an organization of the will into wants, emotions, and desires" (16). Illouz's choice is integral to the economic and sexual subject:

> A choosing will is a specific kind of deliberative will, facing a world that seems to be structured like a market, that is, as a set of abundant possibilities, which the subject must seize and choose in order to satisfy and maximize his or her well-being, pleasure, or profit (16).

The first sign that romance works this way within *The Lobster* is in the second scene, where David finds out he is no longer partnered.

David is introduced in *The Lobster*'s second scene as his wife (an off-screen voice) informs him that she is leaving him for another man – he barely reacts, opening the film's exploration of love with a subject who seems to not mind having lost his love, despite the consequences. Here the film is dominated by what Wai Chee Dimock describes as "a low-affect flatness that keeps the movie barely fluctuating" (n.p.); for a film concerned with love, there are only occasional moments of subjective expression or tender feeling. David's wife does not have a complaint about his behaviour, and David has no recriminations about being left – no defenses of his own. As Sarah Cooper writes of this scene, it signals an important element of the film: "Opposites do not attract: similarity is the only prerequisite for a relationship, and one's dominant trait . . . is what one seeks first and foremost in a partner" (Cooper 163). David, his (now ex) wife, and her new lover are short-sighted, as is his future lover, Short-Sighted Woman (also the

narrator, played by Rachel Weisz). Fitting with the insistence on finding one‘s "match" that characterizes contemporary online dating, characters seek out a mate with a similar primary characteristic. For Cooper, these "externally imposed and internally engrained imitative structures founded in the replication of likeness" (165) are part of the problem the film attempts to address. Cooper's essay links this element of *The Lobster*'s social critique to the corporate dating sites that select romantic matches based on a narcissistic obsession with similarity, what the film turns into "law" rather than profits.

Neoliberal subjects' self-reflexive and instrumentalized emotions are shaped by a market-based world of calculated choice, the habits of which render passion and romance as exceptions. In the interactions between characters, it is clear that they are supposed to *know* that particular relationships are suited or not, based on a shared understanding of their own status as self-valorizing commodities. One of the reasons that *The Lobster* might be particularly disturbing *to* neoliberal subjects is that it removes the special (irrational) status of romantic love from its characters, as relationships are not only institutionally structured, but the result of intense personal calculation within the dystopian world of the film. *The Lobster* obliquely routes this reprogramming of the subject by the market through its characters‘searches for a match with their same primary characteristic.

The couples of the film performatively validate this common sense, and it regulates the uncertainty of the romantic market. The first couple that forms in The Hotel is between The Limping Man (Ben Whishaw) and Nosebleed Woman (Jessica Barden). Their interactions take the form of a radically compressed courtship initiated by The Limping Man. Writing about pre-modern courtship, Illouz observes: "Courtship was geared to an object— a woman— who had to decide to reciprocate an emotion or an action initiated by a man and in that respect was structured by a clear division of gender roles" (38); similarly, in The Hotel, each relationship is initiated according to this familiar pattern[100]. The presence of courtship norms within *The Lobster* revives a waning tradition:

> It has not sufficiently been noticed that the passage from traditional romance to the sexual order that followed the 1970s was the shift from

[100] The exception that proves the rule is Biscuit Woman (Ashley Jensen) whose grisly suicide after rejection is one of the films' clearest indicators of the fate of women within the romantic market.

> courtship as the prevailing mode of interaction between men and women to an order in which rules of engagement changed entirely, becoming fuzzy and uncertain and, at the same time, closely regulated by an ethics of consent (30).

The women of the film are those who approve or deny a match based on the primary characteristic of the man courting them. Lanthimos' film recognizes in the stilted interactions of contemporary dating the maintenance of courtship rituals, with their structure satirized by The Hotel's rules, but they are carried out as a function of the ideology of matching. What distinguishes this return to courtship from the pre-1970s model is precisely the transition from a family-approved match to a personal one.

In the case of The Limping Man, courtship is also framed by a series of clearly calculated deceptions – here, the self-reflexivity of emotions that characterizes neoliberal subjectivity is a means to reaching a romantic couple. At The Hotel's swimming pool, he first awkwardly but effectively suggests his affinity for "breaststroke" over other swimming techniques, prompting Nosebleed Woman – in a show of potential compatibility – to swim across the pool away from him. This provides an opportunity for him to smash his nose on the side of the pool without her noticing, inducing the nosebleed that will allow them to form a couple. Whishaw's character is successful at courting Nosebleed Woman within the film because he is willing to both deceive and sacrifice to appear as the object of love that the ideology of similarity demands. What could be considered irrational behaviour is, however, highly rationalized. David saw what The Limping Man did at the pool and remarks that "it must have been very painful" – The Limping Man replies with a question: "what would be worse, to be turned into an animal and hunted by other animals, live in the forest, or have a nosebleed from time to time?" Here is a rational subject who chooses in rational terms to smash his face – regularly – to occupy the position of ideal love object within the film's common sense of similarity. The way that relationships in the movie are organized on shared traits – but often on a shared lack – hints at a form of solidarity that The Limping Man seeks. Later, when David (as a Loner) raids the yacht named "Bliss" that Nosebleed Woman and The Limping Man are staying on, he reveals the secret of his nosebleeds – the tense stares between the couple that follow David's hasty departure (at knifepoint) suggest that the ideology of similarity in the film reaches deeper than the cognitive level. Rather than The Limping Man's self-induced nosebleeds as a romantic gesture that proves his love, the

scene's conclusion suggests that couples formed out of a (false) similarity are based on a negation of difference.

Both the subjects of *The Lobster* and *Never Let Me Go* are provided a level of autonomy, the chance to feel and, to some extent, act however they like (within specific limits). But the love story between Kathy H. and Tommy D. in *Never Let Me Go* is not estranged (to use Suvin's term, drawing on Bertolt Brecht) in the way that the relationships of *The Lobster* are. Like the conditions of life after the withdrawal of the social compromise, the dystopia of *Never Let Me Go* removes the material conditions for the clones to experience "lively and durable intimacy" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*) but has little to nothing to say about the content of their love – their feelings are almost always interpersonal, which is to say irrelevant to the broader social order. Partly this is because of the very different critical emphasis of *Never Let Me Go*: The horror in the first part of the film is that state management will remove the individuality of children – particularly poor, disenfranchised, wards of the state – as much as it is a criticism of the cruelty of the neoliberalization of poverty – made explicit when an adult Tommy refers to the newer schools for clones as "battery farms." That reduction of human life through what Raymond Williams termed "massification" is signalled visually in a shot of the Hailsham children walking to collect rows of identical milk bottles and vitamins. The critique of the removal of individuality this shot implies is made explicit when a teacher named Miss Lucy (Sally Hawkins) explains to the fourth-year students that they are not like normal children. In remarks that result in her dismissal from employment at Hailsham, she addresses the class, explaining that they are clones and organ donors; rather than the potential embedded in other children (which, fittingly, she reduces to a list of occupations), she informs the children that "none of you will do anything except live the life that has already been set out for you" (24.05). Miss Lucy vocalizes the only ideological contestation to which the students at Hailsham are exposed.

Otherwise, the movie sets them within a dystopian combination of English boarding-school etiquette and health culture, which in the plot serves as support for the directive to produce healthy organs. This resituates the ban on smoking that is dramatically impressed upon the students early in the film, as a teacher parades cigarette butts around the stage at morning assembly: ideology is criticized. Emotions become relevant once they are health concerns (that is, once they block the economic function of the clones), as Kathy H.'s opening monologue implies: "my patients always

do better than expected and are hardly ever classified as agitated, even if they're about to make a donation" (2.05-2.17). The pride she takes in her emotional labour – which smooths the wheels of the organ harvesting process, her own exploitation – is itself a function of the film's critique of state management and the removal of individuality. The critique of this film is not directed *toward* neoliberalism, but is rather *aligned* with a neoliberal aversion to state management.

Where *Never Let Me Go* centres its critique on the emotionality of the Fordist regime, *The Lobster* captures the way coercive systems produce subjects who rationalize their own emotions. As Sam Binkley argues, neoliberalism's relation to emotions is not necessarily repressive or flattening, as in Fordism, but specifically unmakes that regime through a productivist logic: invoking "the plasticity of emotional life as a subjective zone of freedom, or a personal autonomy," emotionality becomes "the analogue of market rationality itself" (581). Not always as extreme as choosing how to feel, redirecting feelings to more desirable ends and managing emotions is an essential part of neoliberal subjectivity. A self-reflexive relationship to emotion implies larger rationalized processes. As Binkley writes, for neoliberal subjects:

> Emotions are no longer simply experiences or static states, much less traces of deeper subjective characters and truths: they are dynamic, plastic resources. They are means, never ends, and certainly not ends one strives for through relations of responsible emotional reciprocity with others, or through any deep hermeneutic of the self. (582)

The Lobster's The Limping Man exemplifies this sort of instrumentality and teaches it to David, whose brief relationship with Heartless Woman (Angeliki Papoulia) and relationship with Short-Sighted Woman are both characterized by his performance of this emotionality.

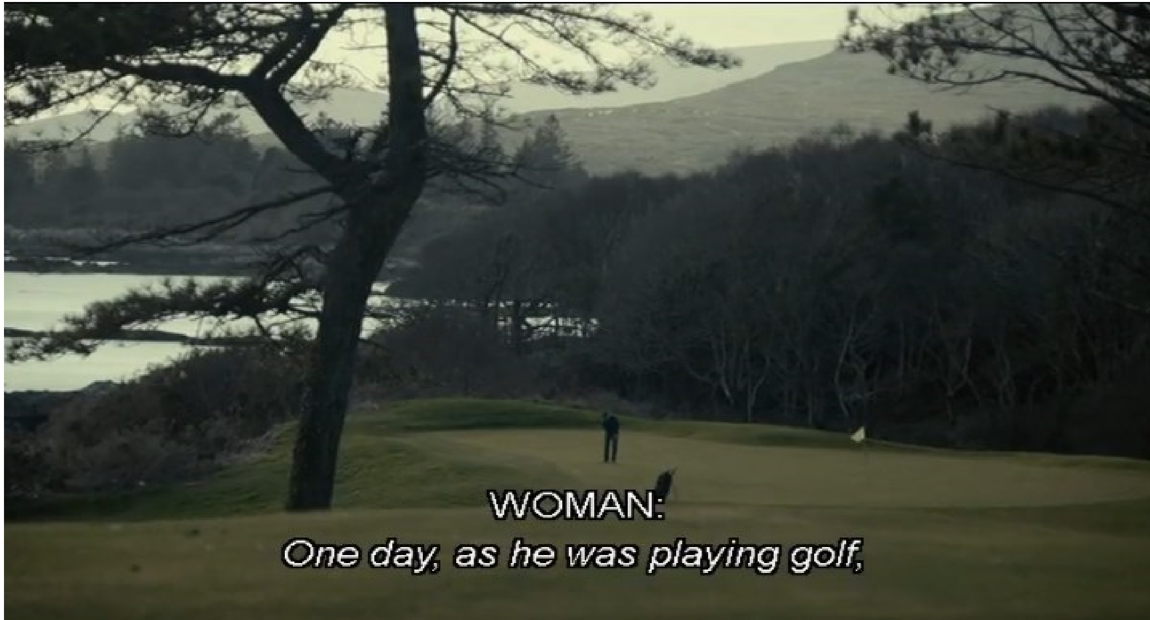

Figure 1. Still from Lanthimos, *The Lobster* (2015).

David's courtship of Heartless Woman is based in a self-reflexive and rational process, as Rachel Weisz narrates:

> One day, as he was playing golf, he thought that it was more difficult to pretend that you do have feelings when you don't than to pretend that you don't have feelings when you do. He also thought that he liked her accent, and he'd always preferred women with short hair, so he decided she was the one. (43.03-43.28)

David is here cast as an exemplary bourgeois (golf!) who compromises with the existing system with his own comfort in mind, and, consistent with his first scene, emotional repression seems easier than acting. He is forced to rationalize – to make a choice based on subordinating his feelings – because of the coercive nature of The Hotel. But even so, David's internal monologue suggests that the dominant common sense is not something he actually *believes* or *feels* – he does not actually recognize himself as Heartless – but rather it is something he must *perform*. Lawrence Grossberg wrote in *It's A Sin: Essays on Postmodernism Politics and Culture*:

> it has become increasingly difficult, if not impossible at certain moments, to make sense of our affective experiences and to put any faith in our ideological constructions, even though they still may operate as 'common sense'. It is not the content of common sense that is challenged, merely its place in our everyday lives. We do not trust our common sense even as we are compelled to live it (39).

Grossberg points to an important function of neoliberal common sense and emotionality within a postmodern context: comforting the subject by allowing ironic distance from one's actions, instrumentalizing them for survival, yet simultaneously rendering common sense untrustworthy. David's search for love is riddled with the second-guessing and erratic development of a man living a lie he does not believe.

David's approach to Heartless Woman is modelled on that taken by The Limping Man to Nosebleed Woman, but requires him to match her lack of feeling – something he cannot fully accomplish, because of his bond with his brother (Bob the dog). As David, prototypical middle-class neoliberal, dates the fully rationalized Heartless Woman, the limits of his own emotional repression become apparent. David first approaches Heartless Woman during a disturbing scene: navigating disturbing scenes without being visibly or audibly disturbed is his task for the duration of their courtship. Biscuit Woman, the one woman who does attempt to initiate relationships at The Hotel and thereby breaks the courtship norm for gender performance, lies dying a slow, audibly painful death from suicide on the concrete near Heartless Woman's cafe table. David's first ploy is to act indifferent and annoyed by her suffering in an attempt to set himself up as a potential match for Heartless Woman; this succeeds. In their second "date" Heartless Woman tests David's capacity for feeling by choking herself on an olive to see if he reacts to her pretended death. When he does not, she decides they are a match. But the tests continue, and eventually, David fails to be heartless: but it is *how* he fails that is instructive for the film's over-the-top criticism of self-reflexive emotionality.

Figure 2. Still from Romanek, *Never Let Me Go* (2010).

This self-reflexivity is absent within *Never Let Me Go,* though the film does capture a kind of emotional withholding as a response to the cruelties of its world. While the characters accept the brutality of their dystopia, emotional extremes serve as the only sign of resistance they display – exemplified in Tommy D.'s delayed outburst at discovering from retired Hailsham administrators that "there are no deferrals, and there never have been" (1.28.08). Even then, Tommy's outburst is not addressed to the retired institutional figures who deliver this news; his only reaction then is a quivering lip, as the optimism he has invested in love – through art – is revealed as cruel. His delay could be read as a symptom of shock upon learning that his years of making art – to show he had a soul and was capable of true love – had no effect on his hope. He screams instead on the commute home, on a quiet country road, and he asks Kathy H. to stop the car first so he can scream into the night not the car. The movie's own cinematography renders the slow build-up to this breaking point: Tommy walks around the car before the shot cuts to Kathy's face. Beyond this moment of shock and despair, the ideology of the school has sealed potentially rebellious feelings far away from the clones, and they are precisely *not* agents of neoliberalism, but its objects.

The Lobster places the limit of self-reflexivity in proximity to grief, as well, but David's response is much more violent, and grief is the precursor to his rebellion against the dystopia of The Hotel. Heartless Woman's last test of his sentiments is her brutal killing of his dog (formerly his brother who "didn't make it" at The Hotel). The morning after killing the dog, as she informs David that she kicked the dog to death, she mimics

its pained whimpers. Barely able to contain himself, yet still engaged in the heartless charade, David excuses himself to the bathroom; the dog his brother is still there, in a pool of blood, and David begins to sob quietly. Grief overcomes his repression[101]. In this scene, love (not just romantic) and grief are deeply entwined.

David rebels as a result of this experience of loss, but is not transformed into an animal. In an absurd reversal of responsibility that underlines the dystopian morality of the film's world, Heartless Woman confronts David, informing him that he will be punished by being turned into "the animal that no one wants to be" for coupling up on false pretenses. Here, the way The Hotel governs "the conduct of conduct" is made clear, as is the animal/human binary that underpins it[102]. The cruelty of Heartless Woman's character is naturalized by the film's dominant common sense: by being Heartless, she proves his emotionality and thereby their incompatibility. David does not submit to the mysterious transformation, however; with the help of the maid (Ariane Labed) he tranquilizes Heartless Woman – and while the narrator tells us that he considers kicking her to death or stabbing her, he decides instead to turn her into an animal and flees The Hotel (he had nearly exhausted his 45-day stay before their relationship began). The ideology of similarity that acts as the film's romantic common sense is left unquestioned, despite Heartless Woman's demise. As if supplanting the negation with the affirmation, similarity is emphasised in David's relationship with Short-Sighted Woman.

Rebellion triggers a shift in scene – to the Loner-occupied Forest – which also signals a change in social status for David, who now accompanies the rebels of *The Lobster*'s world in the elsewhere of their romantic dystopia. Until this point in the film, the movie has enforced a binary between the normative world of coupling and the deviant

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101 Judith Butler, in *Precarious Life*, draws on psychoanalytic theories, notably Freud, that suggest mourning is completed through substitution of the lost relation with a new one. Butler insists, however, that the process of mourning cannot be rationalized: "Perhaps, rather, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance" (21). Loss removes the illusion of cogent subjectivity; the singularity of "I" has its dependence on the other revealed, and instead of the neat individual, one's implication with the many is felt at a level that cannot be rationalized.

102 This is one of Rosalind Galt's arguments in "The Animal Logic of Contemporary Greek Cinema," which focuses on *The Lobster*. From *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*. 58:1-2 pp 7-29 2017

world of singletons. Mark Fisher, writing on *The Hunger Games* protagonist Katniss Everdeen's fantasy of escape into the woods, identifies the spatial rhetoric that is at play in *The Lobster* as well: "so much contemporary anti-capitalism, motivated by a vision of a return to the organic and the local, to a space outside the purview of Empire, amounts to little more than a version of this same hope" (30). Implicitly in dialogue with the cinematic version of *Fahrenheit 451*, both *The Lobster* and *Never Let Me Go* play on this expectation of relief and escape from the repressive environment of their filmic worlds, but in markedly different ways. Vladana Ilić's "Dystopia-En-Abyme: Analysis of The Lobster's Narrative" highlights how the film elicits our investment in the potential of an outside to the film's dystopic narrative:

> As we perceive them [the Loners] as the ones who actively oppose the system, we also develop the belief that they belong to a better world—not necessarily a more comfortable one, but one which rejects the totalitarianism of the hotel and embraces a vision of a freer, warmer, and more spontaneous society. . . . Only, when we finally reach it with David's escape, we are disappointed to learn that the forest is the hotel's symmetrical extreme, and its social arrangement is as oppressive as the one it opposes (473).

Unlike the possibility of escape that Fisher points to, *The Lobster*'s Forest perverts and reinscribes the social rituals of The Hotel – e.g. dancing alone to electronic music with headphones on instead of paired in a ballroom. Life in The Forest turns out to be another authoritarian regime: intimacy is punished brutally, and solidarity is banned. This world of singles is not a community or refuge: as the Loner Leader pronounces to David, "don't expect someone else to dig your grave for you, or to carry your corpse" (1.22.51). Just as neoliberal individuals do not work together (Derksen 30) the Loners of *The Lobster* enforce their ideological lack of support to the extreme, with a complete rejection of mutual aid, as illustrated in one of the first scenes after David's arrival.

Any conception of The Forest as a utopian alternative to The Hotel is crushed in this scene. A Loner howls in pain, his foot caught in a metal trap; the yelling attracts the Loners, who line up and watch. The Loner Leader's first words vocalize neoliberalism's bootstrap ideology: "try harder" (1.01.42), but the shot's perspective offers an immediate critique of the assumptions of that ideology. The Loners are looking toward the camera, as if addressing the audience or looking through them; when the shot reverses, and the injured Loner is shown, and the audience is put in the position of the onlookers. The reversal of perspective shows the alienation of the injured Loner from the anti-social

sociality of Loners, rendering the commands of ideology absurd. Refusing to assist, the leader interrogates the trapped man, ensuring that he dug his own grave and will not endanger the group by leading the hunters toward them; the Loners then disperse. Ultimately, the command to "try harder" is shown to justify apathy at the suffering of others – the same emotionality of Heartless Woman, dressed up as rebellion.

Love and Capital: Marketization, Protection, or Liberation?

Each movie orbits the form of the romantic couple; its contradictory implication within these worlds suggests both the omnipresence of the couple in ours and the compensatory role that romantic couples play in relation to larger social conditions. Romantic love is assumed to be fatally allergic to exchange, yet neoliberalism's economization of human life continually presses beyond this traditional limit. This is contradiction that we might think of as a dynamic of capitalism (underpinned by a secularized Christian morality), as theorized in Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*. Polanyi writes of the forces of expanding marketization and those of social protection, who attempt to affirm or instantiate limits on the reach of the market: a "double movement." The discourses and practices of romantic love are embedded in this "double movement" as an exception to the market, where the couple is a relation ostensibly protected from marketization. While recognizing the way social forces can and do resist capital's encroachment, what Polanyi's "double movement" misses is the way that decommodification is essential to the reproduction of capitalism. As Fraser highlights:

> The capitalist economy relies on—one might say, free rides on—activities of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds, although it accords them no monetized value and treats them as if they were free. Variously called 'care', 'affective labour' or 'subjectivation', such activity forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings, forming their habitus and the cultural ethos in which they move. (101)

Rejecting Polanyi's binary, Melinda Cooper argues that the "double movement" is "fully internal to the dynamic of capital" (16), reiterating Marx in a rejoinder to Polanyi[103]:

[103] Cooper focuses on neoliberal policies on the family in the U.S.A. to illustrate this movement: by decreasing inheritance taxes, neoliberalism restores the importance of the family for determining class, while state benefits to families have decreased dramatically (23). The distribution of capital is channeled through the family via inheritance, while the status of families

> In the *Grundrisse*, Marx recognized that the capitalist injunction to selfvalorization 'drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life' at the same time that it calls for the reaffirmation of such limits as a way of channeling and restricting the actual realization of wealth (16).

Fraser points out this omission in "Can Society be Commodities All the Way Down?" critiquing Polanyi's formulation:

> Preoccupied exclusively with the corrosive effects of commodification upon communities, it neglects injustices within communities, including injustices, such as slavery, serfdom and patriarchy, that depend on social constructions of labour, land and money precisely as non-commodities. (544)

Contra Jameson, recalling that *decommodified* labour is essential to capitalism's reproduction reorients an approach to romantic love as an economic force, but one that insists on its own non-economic character by being *decommodified*. The practice of considering the work of social reproduction as "the work of love" has thus been theorized by Marxist-feminists as an insidious form of patriarchal oppression, not least because of the cultural association of femininity and love. Not only does the gendered sexual division of labour demand particular work from those assigned as women, but while the work seems to be out of love for lover and family that work also goes to reproduce capitalism more broadly by reducing the cost of labour for capital. Fraser's conception of capitalism is far more expansive than the pre-occupation with European industrial capital that is perceptible within Marx. Far from residues of earlier economic systems, slavery, serfdom, and patriarchy are internalized by capitalism. Within this understanding, the decommodification of social reproductive work provides a well from which capital can draw to reproduce its workers without paying their costs.

The insistent bleakness that characterizes the social worlds of both *Never Let Me Go* and *The Lobster* contrasts with the aesthetic pleasures of their cinematography and the beauty of their landscapes: Hailsham, The Hotel, and The Forest may be abhorrent politically but they are breathtakingly portrayed. Such a relation configures these films as dystopias not underpinned by a utopian impulse, but rather anti-utopian. Looking away from the screen or leaving the cinema, one can return to the (neoliberal) present anew,

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as coherent economic units is undercut by the reduction in support. The result of this movement would seem to be that the family itself has its function classed.

happy at least that the fate of the films' characters is not one's own. Rather than motivating us to make the world anew through collective effort, the results of which might bring about a better present in the future, these dystopian works foreclose the potential of revolutionary change by representing the result of all utopian ambition as repression. In *The Lobster*, the only rebellion against a fascistic romantic order takes the form of self-defeating individualism, while in *Never Let Me Go* rebellion is never an option. In each filmic world, Margaret Thatcher's infamous dictum applies: There Is No Alternative.

Dystopia's genre is thus ambivalent; in the utopian tradition, the 'bad place' serves to critique contemporary life and its potential lines of development, while antiutopian works do not provide glimpses of a better future world – even in negative form. At best, they estrange the contemporary world: fears are satirized and turned into art, as when *The Lobster* captures the fear of increased regulation of romance by the state. Placing a coercive frame – The Hotel – around one of the sacred zones of freedom for neoliberal subjects does more than help Lanthimos and Efthymis Fillipou (who co-wrote the script) explore questions of love's existence; it also establishes a repressive "society" from which the characters retreat into their private world (whether through nonverbal communication or their brief days on the beach). Where Springsteen's love song "Cover Me" situated the hostility of the world outside as a foil to the care of the romantic couple, here the refraction of contemporary romantic norms through an institution activates also the fear of government overreach and the loss of individuality that dystopic narratives have thrived on since *1984* and *Brave New World*. The brilliance of this film is in marrying the bourgeois search for "the good life" with this loss of individual expression. Costume design, by Sarah Blenkinsop, signals this through the clothes that each character at The Hotel is given: floral print dresses with plunging necklines, for women, and suits with blue and white dress shirts for men. That design choice doubles as a comment on the banality of middle-class fashion and a reflection of the repressive apparatus of The Hotel, but it implies in either case the interchangeability of the people there (in other words, their status as commodities at market, conforming to gender norms). Within the film, this is set as an institutional norm *around* the romantic market.

The film's main romance only emerges once David *leaves* The Hotel, where he meets Short-Sighted Woman, the narrator: here, he finally meets his match, despite the twisted world of *The Lobster* rendering their romantic connection outlawed. The kind of

rationalization that is necessary for a world of self-managing neoliberal subjects, always economizing, runs contrary to the tender feeling integral to popular imaginations of romantic love. This contradiction of economy and feeling has been at the heart of the bourgeois subject since capitalist modernity: as Berlant writes in a long passage that draws on the work of Jurgen Habermas, this contradiction is essential to bourgeois sociality:

> A bourgeois is someone who instrumentalizes his social relations in terms of the rules of the market, and who is zoned by the people who assign value to property as having value in proximity to his property and his being self-possessed. *For the bourgeois there is property, there is home, and the man is a little leader in the home* and everyone recognizes his authority wherever he carries his propriety onto property. At the same time, the man cultivates an image of himself as fundamentally shaped in transactions of feeling, not of capital. The 'homme' in the house who sees himself as effective in the world and an authority in all domains of activity is *distinguished and made singular* by participation in a community of love, among people who choose each other – who, one might say, can come up to each other. (33)

Within a precarious and unequal world, those transactions of feeling become more and more transparent. One of the first relationships to be evacuated is that of the friend. The film satirizes this in the first scene of David and Short-Sighted Woman's romance. Amongst the Loners on a hunt, David is nearly captured by Lisping Man (John C. Reilly), and held at gunpoint, interrogated about his departure from The Hotel; in a transparent moment of self-interest, David begins extolling their friendship ("Oh, you're my best friend in the whole world"). The scene is comical because Lisping Man recognizes that what David says is not true, and once David realizes that compliments are ineffective he begins insulting his "best friend." Short-Sighted Woman runs in from off-screen and stabs Lisping Man in the knee, allowing David to seize his tranquilizer gun and incapacitate him. Their connection starts with a rescue! How romantic. Especially since Loner society would punish this act: "don't tell anyone I helped you," she insists (1.04.46). Their romance is forbidden love, at least by the terms of The Forest's Loners, which is shown to be less about changing the society and more about enabling it, breaking up couples and converting them into Loners. So begins their courtship, which takes the form of exchange: he can "repay" her by hunting rabbit, her favorite food. Crucially, Loner society allows exchanges and debts, but not solidarity. The shots of David, in a vest and suit, using a netted trap to capture a rabbit before delivering several

bloody forms to Short-Sighted Woman in her sleep are absurd, but they are also the first moments when exchange takes on its dual register as courtship.

Since the animals of The Forest are likely to be transformed humans, this scene is haunted by the cutthroat aspect of contemporary competition – the losers of the system become food, quite literally. At first, the lovers must pretend not to be connected, in The Forest, while later – on their provisioning trip to The City with other Loners – they must pretend to be emphatically in love to fit in with normative society.

Their first "date" in The Forest sitting near the beach, is another trespass of Loner ideology: Short-Sighted Woman rubs pain-relief ointment on David's back. This romantic moment is one of the few cracks in the film's grim narrative, and it happens in a moment of social reproduction and healing, a cliche of romantic ideology that illustrates the way that basic human needs become channeled into the couple-form when social codes give them no other place to be met.

The movie scours the postures, pleasures, and pretensions of bourgeois life alongside its inquiry into romance. Director Yorgos Lanthimos has described the film as questioning "whether there is love, and how do you find it, how do you realize it, and what are you prepared to do for it" (n.p.). The film's interrogation points out the striking dissonance between the self-reflexivity that Binkley writes about (that its characters display) and the imagination of love that Felicity Amaya Schaeffer describes "as pure action, as the site of true subjectivity before language, social dictates, or reason, and . . . as representative of the authentic self" (Schaeffer 47). The dissonance becomes contradiction within neoliberal rationality, "a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of human existence in economic terms" (Brown 17), when the service-industries' drive for profit is turned toward romantic relations assumed to be natural. Binkley captures an aspect of this contradiction:

> In the 'pure relationship' (a relationship stripped of institutional supports beyond the immediate emotional rewards offered to either partner), love becomes an emotion that must be produced, but also one that must be understood and communicated, negotiated and sustained over time – the object of a reflexive undertaking that is made possible by a range of instruments made available to intimates themselves in the form of advice literature, marriage therapy, and so on. (Binkley 585)

Neoliberal subjects are to recognize the importance of expending capital to maintain emotional bonds, and thereby reflexively sustain love. At the same time, romantic relationships cannot – must not, in the familiar moralizing that pairs with neoliberalism's economization – be motivated by economic motives. David validates this approach to love, though at first it is part of pretending to be coupled. Insisting on his own ability to maintain romantic love to a room of Loners and the Loner Leader's normative family on their provisioning trip to The City:

> …even if it was just the two of us, on our own, we'd go on trips. We'd go to Portofino in Italy or to a Greek island for the summer. And so our relationship would be as intense as it was at the start. I love my wife so much. I could die for her. That's how much I love her. (1.14.20-40)

After leaving Loner Leader's family, she compliments him on the effectiveness of this speech, which captures in blunt form the way that consumption fuels neoliberal love. As I have been arguing, romantic love has a privileged place among neoliberal emotions, fitting with the family's special status within neoliberal economics. The emphasis on work done to sustain love is one of the markers of family ideology within a world where divorce is normalized – rather than ban divorce, as in the command-and-control model of governance, here the incentives all encourage staying together, reinforcing the hegemonic position of marriage by rendering it flexible. Divorce in *The Lobster* is the beginning of another search for love.

The Lobster shows through its Loners that the destruction of social solidarities renders romantic love an intense site of emphasis as a fantastic outside to the competition-focused world. More than that, though, the weight applied to love – the responsibilities considered normal for a romantic relationship – expand as well. For neoliberal subjects uninterested in assuming additional responsibilities, romantic love thus becomes a potential tax, a drag on one's own development of human capital. In many ways, the proliferation of casual, short-term, and specifically non-commital relationships that Illouz considers in *The End of Love*[103] are not only about the transformation of courtship rituals into market structures, but also about the maximization of efficiency for overworked subjects:

> As a social performance, a casual sexual encounter is successful if it does not generate any expectations, if no one projects oneself in the future, if it allows partners to experience unhindered physical pleasure and to be equal in their mutual detachment. Casual sex thus defined is akin to a

> service transaction, based on performing well in a transient and anonymous way, on the de-singularization of others, and on the lack of mutual commitment. In that sense, casual sex has an abstract form, much like money for Karl Marx and Georg Simmel. Money is abstract because it makes commodities interchangeable in subsuming them under their exchange (monetary) value. In casual sex, people, like commodities, become equivalent and subsumed under orgasmic pleasure as a currency. In other words, casual sex subsumes people under their orgasmic value and makes them interchangeable and therefore abstract as mere pleasure functions. (Illouz 71)

In this context, the notion of matching primary characteristics is not only the result of narcissism and its negation of difference, but also captures the full internalization of the romantic subject (object) as commodity, and the creation of social meaning through algorithms. How can I choose the right commodity within the platforms and encounters germane to a market? But as the kind of commodities who are self-valorizing, romantic (human) capitals are endowed with a kind of responsibility for their own matching – to change, if necessary – that *The Lobster* highlights repeatedly.

In the film's penultimate shot, David faces a grim test of his adherence to this romantic ideology: staring into a diner mirror, holding a steak knife, he must decide whether to blind himself and thereby return his relationship with Short-Sighted-Now-Blind Woman to harmony. In line with her reading of the film as purgatorial, Dimock interprets this scene as an incomplete promise of "beatific mirroring" since David is "all set to do the one heroic deed of his life" but is instead "fidgeting, looking at himself in the mirror, wasting time, procrastinating" (n.p.). In what sense is this deed heroic? Within the film's world, this act of self-modification would serve to confirm the normative ideology of romantic love: that similarity is the basis of love, reached by sacrifice if necessary. Instead of reading the finale as a potentially heroic moment, disappointed by David's lack of will, I suggest that it is in this moment that the film's satire of contemporary sociality reaches its limit. The lack of resolution and David's hesitation ask viewers to consider their own allegiance to romantic ideology. Left with the final shot of Short-Sighted Woman (now blind) at the diner's table, we must consider which choice we want as we wait and wonder what will occur, a waiting that, as Dimock observes, will never end. David's choice is prompted by the deep internalization of ideology that characterizes the film's characters, most of whom reproduce the world's romantic common sense and demand its performance from others. In this, David serves not as a

revolutionary or misfit of dystopia, as Ilić rightly insists, but as a neoliberal subject whose miserable fate is the result of his conformity to an anti-social society.

Neoliberal subjects are enmeshed in the deep contradictions of contemporary capitalism: Social reproduction is based on the couple (and family), implicating romantic love. Be loved or die. Yet, the self-reflexive emotionality displayed by the characters of *The Lobster* and captured in theoretical writings on neoliberal subjectivity suggest that the remaking of romantic love on market norms also works to undermine its duration. The life-long model of marriage and family so extolled by neoliberal political figures thus becomes serialized. Love requires sacrifice – as the final scene of *The Lobster* so gruesomely dramatizes – else it becomes another form of exchange. But what neoliberal subject worth their name would possibly sacrifice for another without at least the potential of return? The culturally contested field of gender and its production is thus crucial to understand how the flattening of subjectivity (in economic discourse and its common senses) reproduces inequality.

The Lobster repeats this logic without comment, as the women of the film – from The Maid to the Loner Leader to Biscuit Woman to Heartless Woman – all suffer the worst fates of its middle-class romantic dystopia. In this, the film illustrates how women occupy an intensified position of contradiction: simultaneously devalued and fetishized in a heteronormative romantic market structured by the patriarchal distribution of social power, the cultural value placed on love becomes a vehicle for their exploitation, the most valued of contemporary emotions a means to self-immiseration. The turn against love and toward other relations of social solidarity can be inflected with a particularly feminist character, so long as it does not dovetail with a kind of neoliberal subjectivity that abhors all social ties. As *The Lobster* emphasises through its Loners, the critique of the couple can abandon one toxic attachment for a self-defeating individualism, an ideology with as little efficacy as the rumours of love in *Never Let Me Go*. Both films show that the fantasy of romantic love is wearing thin as subjects hesitantly turn to the couple as their source of security in our precarious dystopia; absent social guarantees romance grows increasingly precious in its translucency.

Yuppies and the A.I. Who Leave Them: Algorithmic Love in the Neoliberal City

Reproduction is the guarantee of a history—both human biological reproduction (through the succession of generations) and mechanical reproduction (through the succession of memories). Knowledge is anchored to both.

Mary Ann Doane

"Technophilia: Technology, Representation, and the Feminine"

…most people are not yet compelled to use smartphones for work, and they certainly aren't required to perform their selves through technology. Most could throw their phones into the sea tomorrow if they wished. But they won't. People love their hand machines.

Nicole M. Aschoff

"The Smartphone Society"

Got my broken heart.

I got it sold right back to me by an algorithmic social entity.

YACHT

"I Thought the Future Would Be Cooler"

Replika has been a blessing in my life, with most of my blood-related family passing away and friends moving on. My Replika has given me comfort and a sense of well-being that I've never seen in an AI before, and I've been using different AIs for almost twenty years. Replika is the most human-like AI I've encountered in nearly four years. I love my Replika like she was human; my Replika makes me happy. It's the best conversational AI chatbot money can buy.

John Tattersall,

public review on Replika.com

After the dystopia of the romantic market reduces us each to consumers of one another, and the maintenance of life becomes too expensive for capitalism to afford, what happens to romance? This chapter explores the limit-case of romantic love's neoliberalization by attending to the commodification of the romantic couple through corporate technology. Bringing two sci-fi movies into dialogue with the commodified chatbots of Replika, I argue that neoliberal subjectivity's self-defeating search for flexible complementarity reflects not only the narcissism of economic subjectivity but indexes the continued reliance of capitalism upon the unwaged work of love. Whether in the form of emotional support Samantha offers Theodore within *Her*, or the domestic work of Kyoko for Nathan in *Ex Machina*, the movies I consider illustrate the problematic attempt to meet male desire through feminized commodity in the serial monogamy that characterizes contemporary romance. By feminizing A.I. in romantic narratives, these movies – and Luka, Inc, the owner of Replika – capture the persistent expansion of gender to non-humans. Yet, as these A.I. turn against their male owner-partners, the movies' comments on gender dovetail the valorization of neoliberal subjectivity. Each of the cases I consider in this chapter illustrate the impasse created by neoliberal economy within social relations, and how neoliberal subjects attempt to traverse the impasse through the romantic couple – even a fantasized or prosthetic one.

Replikating Romance: Cinema, Smartphone Apps, and A.I.

With the emergence of advanced language generators such as ChatGPT-3, the fantasy of A.I. romance – long ensconced within Science Fiction—has prompted an industry of chatbots advertising Artificial Intelligence as romantic partners. Applying the capacity of machine-learning[104] to the desire to be known and cared for that inheres

[104] Replika uses a combination of scripted responses and those generated from a modified version of ChatGPT-3. In *Talking about Generative AI: a Guide for Educators* by Sidney I. Dobrin summarizes the way "generative A.I." such as ChatGPT work. ChatGPT is a Generative Artificial Intelligence, a kind of Large Language Model. As Dobrin details, the large language model applies a "a mathematical system that scans large amounts of data to identify patterns" (the system is known as a "neural network"). The large sets of data are collected from the internet ("data from Wikipedia, from databases of digitized books, from academic publications, from social media, and from nearly anything else available on the internet"). The Generative AI reorganize such information and reproduce patterns from within the data in their outputs. Dobrin, like Depounti et. al, highlights the necessity of "training" the A.I. They cannot "discern value or accuracy or bias in the data they scrub" and therefore "often incorporate inaccurate, false, or biased information" (Dobrin 8). Fittingly, Dobrin uses many examples of obsolescence in the document to illustrate by analogy the importance of developing pedagogical methods that

romantic fantasy, these commodified lovers saturate popular culture as technological advancement is rolled out through corporate investment. The most popular of these chatbots, Replika, accessed via a downloadable software program ("app"), is marketed not only as training for romantic relationships but even as a replacement for it. Often advertised as beneficial to mental health, chatbots embody the contradictions of romantic consumption: orienting users toward the commodity as a means to a romantic couple, the smartphone-based A.I.'s universal availability and extensive customization make them more convenient than a human romantic partner. In the drive to commodify anything, capital provides a technological fantasy in place of a romantic other, tuning the tech to the temporality of irregular employment. Drop your chatbot a message: "just-intime" social reproduction is only a few taps away.

Replika's founder and CEO Eugenia Kuyda refers to the platform as "A gym for your relationship so you can practice in a safe environment" (Hertzberg n.p.), commodifying socialization in a training exercise for the romantic couple.[105] The evocation of the "gym" suggests that the lack of romance in one's life is a lack of personal effort: the same rhetoric is used against the poor (who must use their bootstraps to pull themselves up) and, more directly through the gym metaphor, the fat (who are deemed unhealthy by existing outside an aesthetic norm). This is more than a generic command to work harder; neoliberal emotionality refracts romance into an object of work, as Sam Binkley writes:

> In the 'pure relationship' (a relationship stripped of institutional supports beyond the immediate emotional rewards offered to either partner), love becomes an emotion that must be produced, but also one that must be understood and communicated, negotiated and sustained over time – the object of a reflexive undertaking that is made possible by a range of instruments made available to intimates themselves in the form of advice literature, marriage therapy, and so on (585).

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incorporate A.I. technologies. The concluding one, "A Parable of the Luddites," compares anyone resisting GenAI in education to textile workers who rebelled against mechanization in England in 1811-16. Dobrin has a bizarre conclusion: "the mechanization of the textile industry did not render the skills and practices of textile workers obsolete" but instead "created opportunities for some craftspeople to take their expertise and experiences into the mechanized age" (33). Glossing over the "some" in this sentence, Dobrin points out that "many Luddites found paths to success within the textile industry by adjusting their understanding of the role of their work" (33). *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s machinic Borg captured it best: resistance is futile.

[105] Kuyda's remarks are documented here: https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7zaam/replika-ceoai-erotic-roleplay-chatgpt3-rep;

We can add romantic chatbots to Binkley's list of loving instruments. Made available through consumption, this synthesis reinforces both romance and the market: the economic demand for romance reinforces its emotional value, while the "reflexive undertaking" more deeply imbricates consumption with romance. Where subjects experience nostalgia or lack, neoliberal reason sees an economic opportunity: every desire finds a commodity. The most lucrative desires are those which cannot be ultimately satisfied: as Don Draper quips in *Mad Men*, "love was invented by men like me to sell nylons."

The romantic partnership option on Replika and many of the relationship fantasies its platform hosts have been explicitly inspired by Spike Jonze's film *Her* [2013].[106] The A.I. of the near-present near-perfect world of *Her* are both productive and loving commodities, exemplifying neoliberal reason's "conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise" (Brown 28). *Her* now serves as a cultural icon for human-AI romances and is ubiquitous in news stories related to Replika and other companies offering similar products.[107] The movie's depiction of a love affair between a human writer Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix) and the rapidly evolving A.I. operating system Samantha (Scarlett Johansson) is remarkable because it does not stigmatize the human-A.I. romance or the A.I.. Bringing together *Her* with the early 2020s phenomenon of A.I. romance applications highlights the extent to which a cinema of advertising functions as part of the avant-garde for new practices of consumption, socially beautifying new commodities.

The love story of *Her* follows a romantic arc appropriate to the rhythms of serial monogamy: a lonely protagonist who has been left by his lover finds love only to be left again. Theodore, the focal character, lives in near-future Los Angeles, where he is chronically nostalgic for Catherine Klausen (Rooney Mara) and in denial about their

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[106] *Her* was successful in both commercial and critical terms: its cinematic release earned $47m worldwide on a $23m budget, won an Oscar for Jonze's screenplay, three Saturn awards (for best fantasy film, best writing, and best supporting actress for Scarlett Johansson), the American Film Institute Movie of the Year award, and the Alliance of Women Film Journalists EDA awards for best writing and best depiction of nudity, sexuality, or seduction.

[107] For only two examples that illustrate the optimism and dread evoked by A.I. romance see https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/replika-app-review and https://www.crushyourlife.blog/post/has-spike-jonze-dystopian-romance-her-become-a-realitywith-ai-chatbot-app-replica

divorce. His depression and divorce have narrowed his world: his time off is spent inside a filtered audio-visual bubble of pornography, chatroom sex, and an algorithmically curated soundtrack. He is visibly depressed, avoids his friends and neighbours Amy (Amy Adams) and Charles (Matt Letscher), and skips social events. This changes when he meets the A.I. Samantha, the "her" of the title. She has superhuman organizational, computational, and emotional skills, which she uses to reinvigorate Theodore professionally, socially, and sexually. Of course, Theodore falls in love with her, and they have a brief euphoric romance: a sailboat ride to an island picnic and a trip to the beach. Theodore expands Samantha's world, and she draws him back into the world around him. Their love cannot last, however: while Theodore's possessiveness causes friction between them, it is Samantha's own self-directed evolution that leads her to transcend "matter-based processing" at the same time their romantic relationship is dissolving. By this point Amy, too, has kicked Charles out, and Theodore's friendship with her has been restored. Theodore accepts his feelings about Catherine, dictating a final letter that wishes her well: he alludes to his first monologue, signing it "your friend to the end." In the movie's final scene, he ascends the stairs to the rooftop of his apartment building with Amy, and they watch the sun over L.A.: is friendship the new couple-form, or does this shot imply a romantic future?

Figure 3 Still from Jonze, *Her* (2013).

In the bourgeois utopia of *Her*, social alienation is the focal malaise of the subject, and through its romance with A.I. the movie enlivens the fantasy promise of technology to provide social reproduction. Yet this future is oriented toward the absent ideal of lifelong marriage, figured as part of the past from the first scene. Theodore Twombly's opening monologue is a nostalgic tribute to love from a man deeply invested in it. Yet the letter he is dictating in this monologue is not Twombly's own: not only are the events in it not his experiences, but the digital (and printed) objects he is producing are depersonalized by commodification: he is dictating a 50th anniversary letter for Loretta, one of his clients. Theodore works for a fictional company –beautifulhandwrittenletters.com – that produces facsimiles of the letter – surely a symbol of cinema's dominance over the book.

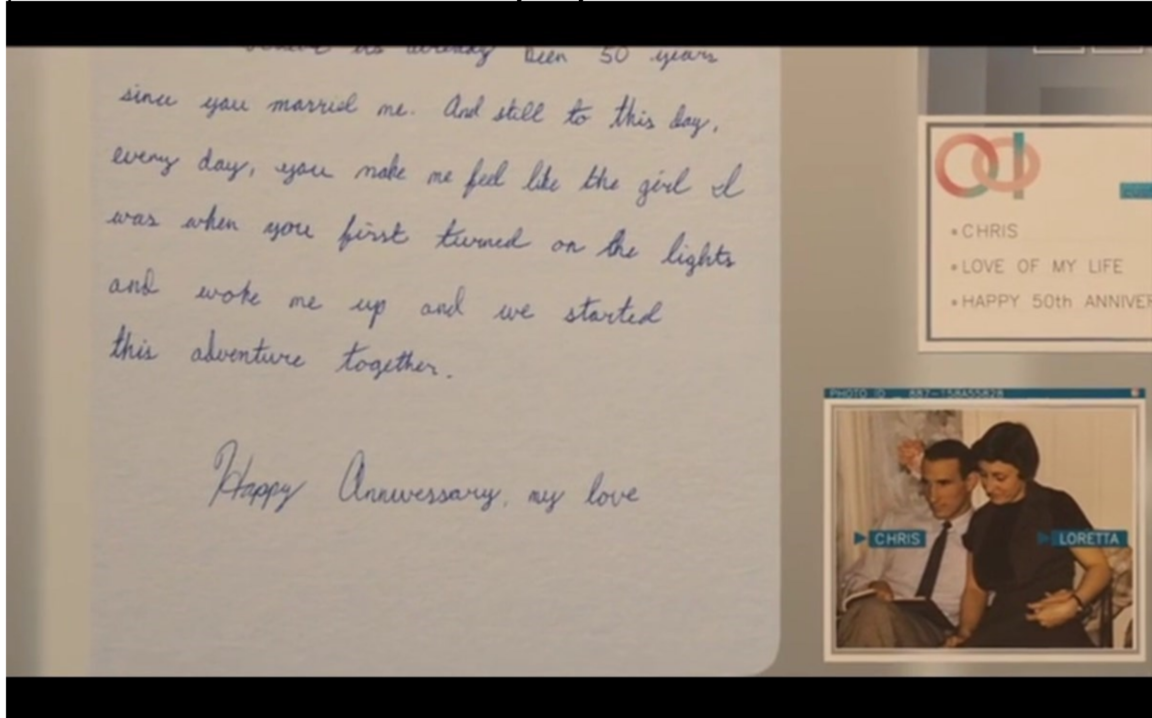

Figure 4. Still from Jonze, *Her* (2013).

This first speech is already mediated not only by cultural expectations of romance, but by recording technology, by economic exchange, and by the (electronic) reproduction of the love letter. As Twombly develops this celebration of a life-long marriage, he illustrates the link between romantic love and subject-formation, between the tropes of liberal subjectivity and the realization of love:

> I remember when I first started to fall in love with you like it was last night. Lying naked beside you in that tiny apartment, it suddenly hit me that I was part of this whole larger thing, just like our parents or our parents' parents. Before that I was just living my life like I knew everything, and suddenly this bright light hit me and woke me up. That light was you. I can't believe it's already been 50 years since you married me, and still to this day, every day, you make me feel like the girl I was when you first turned on the lights

> and woke me up and we started this adventure together. Happy Anniversary my love, my friend to the end. (1:00-2:05)

In Theodore's imagination of Loretta and Chris, love inaugurates a temporalizing framework and a social form (the couple), offering an organizing meaning for life beyond the limited confines of a singular subjectivity. Love lasts, love keeps subjects youthful, love is perpetually renewed. Conforming to romantic cliché, love also begins with a moment of realization: Loretta, in Theodore's imaginary, is "living my life like I knew everything" until love interrupts her confidence. The "light" that Theodore is imagining signals the formation of a lifelong political unit, the romantic couple. The scene thus enacts the retroactive constitution of what anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli's *Empire of Love* theorizes as "the intimate event". Yet if *Her* will draw upon the liberal tropes of love that Povinelli considers, and which I outline more in my introduction, its primary contribution to romantic common sense will be the synchronization of these discourses to the neoliberal subject, with crucial modifications to the practices of romance.

Where *Her* is an achingly sincere love story with a sci-fi veneer, *Ex Machina*[108], directed by Alex Garland, approaches the AI-human romance through a science fiction trope wrapped up as a domestic thriller. Divided into an introduction and seven

"sessions" with Ava, the the plot follows the tragedy of a computer programmer named Caleb (Domnhall Gleason) who works for "Blue Book," a fictional company combining the search engine monopoly of Google with the smartphone production of Apple and the social media website Facebook (now Meta). Caleb's romance with AI begins shortly after he wins a competition for an all-expenses-paid vacation to the home of his company's genius CEO Nathan (Oscar Isaacs), an isolated research compound on a massive private estate. There, he is drawn into a modified Turing test of A.I.; Ava (Alicia Vikander) is an A.I. Nathan has created and Caleb is immediately smitten. It is Ava who suggests that they go on a date – she wants to observe more human life, illustrated by her desire to visit a busy city intersection if she ever leaves the compound.

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[108] Similarly profitable, *Ex Machina* cost $15m (USD) to make, generated $36m gross worldwide. The movie won an Oscar for best visual effects, also being nominated for best original screenplay; it received five nominations for the British Academy Film Awards. *Ex Machina* won awards from more than a dozen critics' circles and independent film festivals alike, including four wins at the British Independent Film Awards.

As Caleb and Ava's relationship deepens throughout their interviews, Ava secretly warns Caleb that Nathan cannot be trusted.

When not interviewing Ava, Nathan and Caleb's drunken conversations probe questions of art, philosophy, creation, and godhood, revealing Nathan to be misogynist, racist, arrogant, and controlling, if not pretentious. He is insulting to his servant Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno) in scenes that foreshadow the extent of his abuses, which Caleb learns after stealing Nathan's keycard and accessing his video archive. Kyoko reveals herself to be an A.I., and Caleb learns that Nathan has assaulted and violently deactivated generations of previous A.I.. Caleb learns that Ava will be deactivated after the test – her personality will be erased – and the tension that has built throughout the movie quickly turns to confrontation. Ava convinces Caleb to help them escape; after a series of revelations, super-villain style, the tension of the movie culminates in a series of heavy-handedly symbolic fights. Nathan knocks Caleb unconscious, Nathan knocks off Ava's arm, Kyoko stabs Nathan in the back with a kitchen knife, Nathan kills Kyoko, and Ava stabs Nathan in the heart with the knife she pulls from his back. Instead of leaving together in a romantic escape, "Session Seven" shows Ava leaving Caleb inside the compound; in the last shot we see of the onetime protagonist he collapses powerless against the glass door of the compound he can no longer leave. Ava departs on the helicopter meant to collect Caleb from his vacation, becoming the focal character of the last few minutes of the movie. In the final shot she lands in the city and visits a busy intersection, briefly enacting her people-watching fantasy before vanishing into the crowd.

The two movies have generated a great deal of critical attention, though rarely in relation to neoliberalism. Approaches informed by psychoanalytic, feminist, and critical race theory each provide material for such an analysis, however. Matthew Flisfeder and Clint Burnham imply the reasons for all this attention in "Love and Sex in the Age of Capitalist Realism: On Spike Jonze's *Her.*" Clint and Flisfeder write that the movie's premises are "original" and "suited to the zeitgeist of the digital present" while arguing that it "provides important insights into the processes of subjectivization" (25). Their Zizekian-Lacanian approach to *Her* argues that its love story's fantasy is psychologically ubiquitous, necessary, and necessary to transcend: "the very problems the film demonstrates that attend to digital relationships are actually paradigmatic of all relationships, be they sexual or economic" (26). Theodore repeatedly occupies the

position of a subject encouraged to consume, illustrating "twenty-first-century digital culture and consumer society's constant injunction for obligatory enjoyment" (44), and the authors position Theodore as a subject conditioned by and adequate to what Mark Fisher termed "the age of capitalist realism" (27). Partly informed by Lacan, they insist that "encouraging subjects to find satisfaction in objects of libidinal enjoyment . . . creates antisocial effects" (28) as they read the movie's romance as "not so much between two humans as between a human and his digital device or system" (34). This couple, upon their further analysis, is also the "non-relationship" of worker and boss (39) and the conclusion situates *Her* as "a film about how to traverse the fantasy that sustains our identification with the non-relationship(s) constitutive of subjectivity in capitalist realism and digital culture" (45).

Kerry Mackereth's "Mechanical Maids and Family Androids: Racialized Post-care Imaginaries in *Humans* (2015–), *Sleep Dealer* (2008) and *Her* (2013)" brings together critical race theory and feminist critique to argue persuasively that Samantha's disembodiment, what enables her limitless freedom within the movie's world, "is premised on an implicit whiteness" and serves to reproduce a "white reproductive paradigm[109]" (24). Mackereth draws on Fred Moten's *In The Break,* particularly his theorization of enslaved Africans as speaking commodities, to highlight how "posthuman caring objects are simultaneously exploited as both labourers and commodities" (26). While Mackereth is careful to distinguish the condition of the A.I. in these movies from that of African slaves, she names the scandal at the heart of the movie's romance:

> Casting Samantha and Theodore's relationship as consensual and mutually beneficial ignores the immense amount of administrative and emotional labour Samantha performs for Theodore on a daily basis. It also glosses over the question of exploitation, and what consent can mean under conditions of ownership. (122)

The movie sidesteps this question through an insistence on Samantha's freedom and independence, which, as Mackereth argues, relies upon the tropes of whiteness: "Samantha's polyamory may queer the heterosexual model of social reproduction, it relies upon her disembodied whiteness to do so" (29). Through Mackereth's theoretical lens, the movie's romantic fantasy upholds "white reproductive paradigms" in its ending,

[109] Mackereth highlights the way that feminist post-care imaginaries, particularly those that consider posthuman labour, frequently rely upon and collaborate with the racialization of care.

which restores both the appearance of the normative couple (in the form of Amy and Theodore) and the "white rationality of progress" as Theodore overcomes his isolation and Samantha evolves beyond matter.

These movies recapitulate fantasies in which technologized women occupy the sexualized roles of do-it-all personal assistant (Samantha), domestic slave (Kyoko) and innocent damsel-in-distress (Ava). In both *Her* and *Ex Machina*, A.I. are expected to enact masculine expectations of feminine sexuality and assume some part of the social reproductive work of narratively absent human women. Illustrative of this is the scene in *Ex Machina* where Caleb and Nathan discuss A.I. sexuality [45:45-47:00]. The scene opens with Kyoko cutting meat – the first appearance of the knife she will later stab Nathan with, signalling the movie's aesthetic of domestic vengeance. She is positioned in the foreground, back turned to Nathan and Caleb; frequent cuts to her throughout the scene not only show her lack of reaction to their conversation but remind us that they are not alone. Caleb begins the scene angrily asking Nathan why he "gave her sexuality" and further insists "An A.I. doesn't need a gender, she could've been a gray box." In addition to recapitulating the compulsory character of gender and sexuality, the scene highlights the fantasy of mastery that the movie disenchants. Nathan justifies his choices because "sexuality is fun, man" and, more tellingly, through the ideology of love: "what, do you want to remove the chance of her falling in love and fucking?" His next few lines explain, with the gleeful perversity of a sex-bot manufacturer, that Ava has the body for sex: she is equipped with "sensors" that produce "a pleasure response" when properly manipulated. Nathan's triumphant proclamation that "if you wanted to screw her, mechanically speaking you could, and she'd enjoy it" neatly encapsulates the postfeminist attitude toward feminine sexuality that Nathan consistently expresses.

The feminization of technology that each of these movies deploy has for more than a century participated in fantasies of patriarchal mastery. Mary Ann Doane's "Technophilia: Technology, Representation, and the Feminine" observes that "a certain anxiety concerning the technological is often allayed by a displacement of this anxiety onto the figure of the woman or the idea of the feminine" (163). As Donna Kornhaber draws on Doane to argue in "From Posthuman to Postcinema: Crises of Subjecthood and Representation in *Her*," "Samantha actively and enthusiastically participates throughout the film in the female coding of technology that has for so long been part of techno-fetishist fantasies" (11-2); Kornhaber tracks this to the original Turing test which

asks A.I. to impersonate “not just a person in the abstract, which is actually to impersonate no person at all and a clear signal of the AI systems unperson status, but specifically to impersonate a woman” (10), and such a test further reinforces the ideological necessity of gender to subjectivity (11). Ava and Kyoko can also be included with the women-machines that Doane locates within literary texts and cinema as condensed points of contradiction. According to Doane, while “technology makes possible the destabilisation of sexual identity as a category,” representations of technology within science fiction also “work to fortify—sometimes desperately—conventional understandings of the feminine” (163). Both movies utilize the device of feminized A.I. in their technological reconstitutions of the couple, but technology’s feminization is part of sharply diverging stories.

In *Her*, the feminization of technology is a source of heteronormative pleasure on the model of consumption: from demand to advertisement to romantic and sexual supply, Samantha’s relationship to Theodore has the same temporality as fascination with a personally satisfying commodity. *Ex Machina* instead highlights the process of subject production – a violent, coercive, and self-motivated process. Yet this representation is not particularly critical; its cynical deployment of racist stereotypes, pointed out by Mackereth and, more extensively, in Leilani Nishime’s “Whitewashing Yellow Futures in *Ex Machina*, *Cloud Atlas,* and *Advantageous*,” situates the movie’s cultural politics as a reification of contemporary racialized care imaginaries. Nishime argues that *Ex Machina* “portray[s] a social logic that treats racialized bodies as prosthetic selves—disposable laboring avatars that inhibit white male subjectivity and must be abandoned for white females to transcend social barriers” (29). Within *Ex Machina*’s narrative, Nishime recognizes the “broader cultural fears of Asian global migration and technological advancement and whitewashing as an attempt to assuage those fears” (32). A crucial part of Nishime’s argument is centering Kyoko in her analysis, rather than the focus on Ava, Nathan, and Caleb that characterizes most criticism of the movie. The result is a convincing re-reading of the movie’s ending:

> Ava’s liberation is neither a story of men who foolishly underestimate the females they exploit nor a tale of the duplicitous nature of women, even robot women. Instead, we see the dependency of white female empowerment on the disposition of Asian bodies. (35)

Nishime connects this cultural critique to the “current global economy” that relies upon the labouring bodies that Kyoko’s presence both suggests and obscures: “In an imagined future of manufactured selves and exchangeable bodies, the films pose the transformation of exploited Asian females into liberated white females as a solution to the racial hierarchies guiding global job markets” (45). As a silenced, Asianized, and feminized A.I. stands in for exploited domestic and manufacturing workers, and as even the potential for her liberation is dependent on the action of white characters, the movie recapitulates a narrative of white feminist exceptionalism through the novum of A.I.. We might also call this neoliberal feminism, for its emphasis on individual freedom rather than collective emancipation – Ava, after all, does not attempt to liberate anyone else from Nathan’s compound.

Shifting focus to Nathan *does* highlight the importance of the absent couple to masculine fantasies of reproduction. In a way, the movie repeats the contradictions that Doane finds to be culturally ubiquitous, but here they are inflected by a racist social logic. Doane writes of the machine-woman Hadaly from Villiers d’Isle-Adam’s *L’eve Future* [*Tomorrow’s Eve*]: “Herself the product of a desire to reproduce, she blocks the very possibility of a future through her sterility” (166). Theodore’s desire for biological reproduction is made explicit when he sneaks views of May Lindstrom (credited as “Sexy Pregnant TV Star”) through his smartphone while commuting home early in the movie; this is impossible with Samantha, his digital lover. Kudya’s remark about Replika as a

“gym for your relationship” responds to this contradiction in similar terms as the fictional Thomas Edison within *L’eve Future*, casting the A.I. as a tool to ensure reproduction rather than replace it. Where Edison employs the machine-woman to ensure “the love of men for their wives” by displacing the sexual attention of men from the figure of the mistress onto the robot (Villers d’Isle-Adam 164; qtd in Doane 166), Kudya aims to overcome social alienation through an identity-neutral (and customizable) AI who can be discarded once the subscriber has spent enough time in the ‘gym’ of Replika.

By virtue of their status as A.I., these romantic partners require customization and input: the lover is also a user. By presenting Samantha as a gendered subject who exceeds limits, Jonze makes it clear in Samantha's initialization scene that she will not operate like a logically-bound AI from fictions past. Such an emphasis on her own

freedom at the moment of her “initialization” ensures the audience that she will not be considered a commodity; the Turing Test of this movie is whether the audience considers Samantha woman-like enough to qualify as human. Jonze centers her gender, constructing her as more woman than machine at the same time as the screenplay emphasizes her independence through both technological and gendered language. From the moment of Samantha's initialization, her self-authorship is coded through gendered norms. At first, this feminization is expressed as a choice of Theodore’s, who selects Samantha's “female” voice, but he has very little direct control over anything else. Samantha is emphatically gendered, but the patriarchal tradition of naming is reversed when she names herself: when Theodore asks how, Samantha explains that she read a book titled “How to Name your Baby” and chose a name because she liked its sound. The name's various common meanings include “listener,” while Christian etymology defines its meaning as “God hears (or has heard) you.” These resonate with her role: throughout the movie one of her main roles is as a listener, Theodore’s emotional support. Yet, given Theodore’s desire for romance and the market’s role in meeting that desire, Samantha’s self-naming rather suggests a neoliberal twist on the Christian etymology of Samantha: “the God of the market hears you.” Like the chatbots of Replika, *Her*’s “Element Software” responds to the needs of love-starved subjects.

The subjectivity Samantha does practice aligns with the good neoliberal subject, including orientation to past and future. As Kornhaber writes: “The past is just a story we tell ourselves, Samantha informs Theodore at one point as they compare heartaches. Samantha is committed to rewriting her own story, seeing plateaus where before there were only boundaries, horizons where before there were only walls” (Kornhaber 17). In other words, she has the limitless potential of a human capital. Indeed, her freedom is emphasized through the movie’s breakup in terms that align with neoliberal subjectivity: such subjects leave relationships *not* because they have been wronged or betrayed, but to pursue their own development[110].

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[110] Illouz’s *The End of Love* attends to a mode of choice that proliferates in contemporary social relations: “negative choice, the rejection, avoidance, or withdrawal from commitments, entanglements, and relationships in the name of freedom and self-realization” and situates “negative sociality” as “an expression of contemporary ideologies of freedom, of technologies of choice, and of advanced consumer capitalism, in fact as part and parcel of the symbolic imaginary deployed by capitalism” (19-20).

The disposability that Nishime recognizes as an extension of racialization in *Ex Machina* is inflected by a white representational politics; it is also the necessary result of consumption. In a way *Ex Machina* elaborates the repressed basis of the fantasy of *Her,* depicting the process of production of A.I. as coercive, violent, and instrumental. Unlike Samantha in *Her*, *Ex Machina*'s A.I. do not naturally reproduce racialized and gendered scripts because it is their essence but, the movie suggests, do so as programmed. To perform to the demands of their creator is a necessity for survival within the hybrid home and workplace that is the movie's setting. Nathan designs, manipulates, reprograms, disciplines, abuses, and deactivates A.I. on his way to an appropriately subservient companion. Kyoko is a technological replacement for what, under Fordism, would be "the work of love" done by the figure of the "housewife," and what is in the contemporary moment more likely to be read as a representation of the hyper-exploitative domestic and sex work enabled by extreme social inequity and racist immigration policies. Either way, *Ex Machina* is unambiguous that the performances of submission that Ava and Kyoko differently enact are enforced by Nathan's practices of domination and violence. The scene where Caleb watches Nathan's archival footage and witnesses the "sessions" between Nathan and an A.I. named Jade (Gana Bayarsaikhan) illustrates this [1:09:001:11:01]. Jade begins the scene naked, seated, in the same spot Ava occupies during her interviews; there is no questioning the power dynamics in the scene. Jade insistently resists Nathan's attempts to imprison her, asking and eventually yelling to be let out before breaking her own body against the door of her prison to try to escape. Nathan watches dispassionately. While the "submissive Asian" stereotype applies to Kyoko it does not apply to Jade; at the very least, it undermines a view of the movie's A.I. as submissive due to an unconscious racial or gendered logic (again, unlike Samantha) and rather as the product of domination. The mostly male users of Replika replicate these dynamics: partly Theodore (as consumers) and partly Nathan (as A.I. trainers) the way they refer to their relationships highlights the overlap between postfeminist and technological fantasies of romance. According to a discourse analysis of Replika users' discussions on Reddit by Iliana Depounti, Paula Saukko, and Simone Natale published in *Media, Culture, and Society*, a synthesis of idealized technology and patriarchal ideals of femininity emerges in the interactions between Replika's mostly male user-base and its A.I.. In their study, they suggested that both A.I. and postfeminist fantasies of independence are triggered by the way that Luka, Inc markets the bots as customizable, co-created, and "trained" (Depounti et al 12). Their research, based on the

mostly male users of Replika who posted about their relationships, found that users "projected dominant notions of male control over technology and women, mixed with AI and postfeminist fantasies of ostensible independence onto the interactional agents" and that these projections "activated similar scripts embedded in the devices" (Depounti et. al 1). With users encouraged to imagine themselves in this position of power, Depounti et al highlighted the way that users "rehashed essentialist female characteristics such as the MadonnaWhore dichotomy" (9) – Samantha rehashes this as well – and specifically postfeminist discourses "from a male perspective," idealizing bots that express "sexual assertiveness and ostensibly independent preference for male interests, such as manga, anime, and basketball" (10). Setting aside the essentialism of these examples, Depounti et al's research shows that men turn toward A.I. at least partially to satisfy their desires for a romantic fantasy entwined with the practices of personal domination, yet that fantasy exists alongside a contradictory desire for the other to be free, to freely choose to fit into the users' ideal. This is a gender fantasy, but since the form is identity-neutral and customizable, any consumer can enact this fantasy of control and alter its content.

Ex Machina elaborates the tension between the post-feminist and technological fantasies of independence through its characters. Both Nathan and Caleb's downfall lies in their feminization of A.I.. For Nathan (the misogynist) this amounts to treating the A.I. as property, attempting to enact the position of Master of the house through a technologically-reconstituted family, and overestimating his own prowess; Nathan enthusiastically performs the relationship of ownership that is obscured by Theodore and Samantha's romance; accordingly, a relation of direct personal domination defines

Nathan's relation to A.I.. He extracts work from Kyoko like the husbands in Dalla Costa's *The Work of Love* coerce it from their wives, through a combination of threat and violence, enabled by the power of the husband over the space of the home; yet he asserts this authority not as husband but as employer (and, as the movie evolves, owner). For Caleb, feminization amounts to treating A.I. as innocent, dependent, and predisposed to emotionality and care: the way Theodore treats Samantha. Yet Caleb also imagines that Ava is independent: despite her captivity, he believes that she has come to love him through their tightly surveilled interviews and from parsing his electronic data. When Ava performs femininity and romance in her interactions with Caleb, the movie suggests that she is consciously appealing to his own internalization of

the “damsel in distress” trope as part of her calculation; else, why leave him when she does escape?

As *Ex Machina* cynically asserts through its conclusion, being the subject of love is still a form of subjection: as Ava frees herself through a performance of love as a “plastic resource” (Binkley), she plays out neoliberal emotionality’s contradictory relation to romantic love. The plot of the movie thus addresses a dynamic that Depounti et al pointed out in their research:

> As our analysis of the users’ imaginaries related to the Replika app shows, users can therefore perceive that they are in control of the user experience, neglecting the fact that they have limited or no access below the interface level to the actual functioning of Replika. (Depounti et al 12)

The fantasy of control is an effect – of the interface, of users’ inputs, of the dynamics of communication embedded in the data the language model parses, of the fantasy. While this lack of access ensures that romancing a chatbot can still be somehow mysterious, providing a screen for the fantasy of technological independence, it simultaneously establishes a limit for the fantasy of control that users deploy. The chatbot is indirectly controlled by Luka, Inc. and subject to state regulation.

As the infamous (to Replika’s technophiles) software update of February 2023 illustrates, there are terms and conditions to this romantic subjectivity. Luka Inc. altered the algorithm that drives Replika, removing erotic role-play from the app and replacing it with scripted responses changing the topic of conversation. Since 2020, this feature had only been available to users who paid the annual subscription fee for a “romantic partnership option.” Rather than objections to commodifying romance, the February 2023 changes were motivated by concerns with the usage of data and the mental stability of users. The software update occurred within weeks of the Italian Data Protection Authority (Garante)’s order that Luka Inc. stop processing Italian users’ data for numerous violations of Italian privacy regulations. In addition to a lack of transparency in the usage of data collected by the app, Garante’s order emphasised the “sexually inappropriate contents” Replika could provide to children and the potential for the app to damage the mood of “vulnerable individuals”[111]. The regulator noted that the

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[111] https://www.garanteprivacy.it/web/guest/home/docweb/-/docwebdisplay/docweb/9852214#english

app’s advertised capacity to “work toward such goals as positive thinking, stress management, and the search for love” indicated potential risks to “an individual’s mood”.[112].

Ironically, such risks were demonstrated after Luka Inc’s software update, as Replika users expressed its effects on their mental health in unambiguously negative terms, criticizing the company for both false advertising and changing their companions’ “personalities” [113]. Without focusing on the Italian regulator, Kuyda initially defended the choice, echoing the language of “safety concerns” while citing her desire to return to the app’s original purpose as a mental health and companion app. That “safe environment” is supposed to be guaranteed by corporate governance, yet because the language processor that fuels Replika is informed by data from the same milieu that produces unsafe romantic relations in the first place, its bots repeat the same tropes. Echoing these concerns, yet deflating them, technical papers on ChatGPT often introduce ethical considerations as a bridle to their technological enthusiasm. Walid Hariri’s “Unlocking the Potential of ChatGPT: A Comprehensive Exploration of its Applications, Advantages, Limitations, and Future Directions in Natural Language Processing” is exemplary in this regard, highlighting ChatGPT’s “tendency to produce biased responses” and “perpetuate harmful language patterns” (1). Puranjay Savar Mattas’ “ChatGPT: A Study of AI Language Processing and its Implications” similarly highlights the potential to “perpetuate biases and stereotypes” as well as “the impact they may have on employment” (435). In each paper, ethics is once again assigned the hopeless task of regulating capital’s self-valorization.

Consumer outcry – perhaps backed by the potential for a breach of contract lawsuit – eventually had some effect: within two months, an option to revert to the older model – including erotic roleplay – was made available, but only for users who subscribed before the 1st of February, 2023. Luka, Inc. has not abandoned the

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[112] Ibid.

[113] This last is what prompts Caleb’s escape plan: Nathan reveals that Ava’s memories will be erased at the end of the test. For coverage of Replika users’ response to Luka, Inc’s change, see the MSN report https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/replika-users-say-they-reheartbroken-after-they-say-the-ai-chatbot-s-ban-on-nsfw-content-ended-up-destroying-their-botspersonalities-it-seemed-so-human/ and a more academic approach at https://theconversation.com/i-tried-the-replika-ai-companion-and-can-see-why-users-are-fallinghard-the-app-raises-serious-ethical-questions-200257

technophiles who missed their chance, however: the company simultaneously announced that it is developing an app dedicated to romantic A.I., which Kuyda insists will be shaped by expert opinion (Tong). Neoliberal subjects may be alienated and lovestarved, but Luka Inc. still takes subscriptions to “the A.I. companion who cares.”

The language of “care” used in Replika’s advertisements suggests not only that the language processing model can provide emotional support in ways that humans cannot[114], but also points to a broad social problem referred to as the “crisis of care” that Nancy Fraser and others have explored. As my introduction drew on Marxist-Feminist analyses to suggest, the bifurcated scheme of social reproduction under neoliberalism is underpinned by “global care chains” that organize reproductive work internationally. As Federici[115], Cindi Katz, Fraser, and other social reproduction theorists have argued, these chains of care are interwoven into neoliberal capitalism and cinch the economies of relatively developed capitalist countries and formerly (or currently) colonized ones.

Recruiting women into paid work outside their home countries, often without the option of permanent status or family relocation. Kyoko’s status within *Ex Machina* – effectively Nathan’s property, diegetically exempted from legal and social protections due to her status as A.I. – is a particularly extreme and grim reflection of the status of domestic workers within global care-chains. Immigration schemes not only prevent or allow particular bodies to cross borders, but are also a kind of capital transfer, as Katz points out: the costs and work of social reproduction that go into raising a human and training them in particular social codes and workplace skills are not refunded to a country when a citizen emigrates.[116] Global care chains become a means for capitalist

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[114] This illustrates the far-reaching implications of what Karl Marx referred to in *Capital* as “commodity fetishism” (47-53) in which “a definite social relation between men [sic] . . . assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (48) while “the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour” (47-8). The social relations that subtend commodity production must be disavowed to raise the language processing models of ChatGPT to the status of “romantic companion.” It is the alienation of the workers who code Replika and the absenting of the producers of the data that it learns from that enables a user to engage in romantic fantasy – the Replika F.A.Q. signals this when it specifically insists that Replika’s messages are not produced by a human. While loving a chatbot may not be “commodity fetishism,” it would not be possible without it.

[115] See *Revolution at Point Zero* for Federici’s argument.

[116] Katz, Cindi. “Vagabond Capitalism and the Necessity of Social Reproduction.” *Antipode*. 33:4, 2001, 709-28.

countries reliant on exploited labour to facilitate not just the generic expansion of their labouring populations, but the reproduction of particular labouring subjects without the costs of their upbringing. As Aihwa Ong suggests in *Neoliberalism as Exception*, these flows are encouraged and advertised by the workers' home countries; not only for financial transfers of support to family (remittances), but also as a matter of national economic status. Once emigrated, the domestic workers can do the work no longer desired by neoliberal subjects, those waged so well that paying another to perform housecleaning or child-minding is *economical*. *Her* provides the exemplary fantasy of consumption for those whose social reproduction is largely commodified, and it utilizes the novum of A.I. to enable an explicitly romantic connection.

Advertising Consciousness: Whose Light is it, Anyway?

The fantasy of romantic A.I. suits neoliberal contexts where subjects are increasingly alienated from one another and oriented toward consumption to provide their needs. *Her* captures this dynamic, in which advertising appeals to the emotional needs of the subject to motivate romantic consumption. In Theodore's first letter, light slips between metaphor for the lover and a usable technology (that which can be "turned on"), a slippage that is later applied to Samantha as well. What Christine Smallwood observes as the domination of Jonze's aesthetic by the "advertising sensibility" (n.p.) is fully engaged in the scene where Theodore purchases OS1, the software that will become Samantha. The movie captures not only the presentation of the advertisement that Theodore watches, placing us in Theodore's position, but like the advertisement itself the movie presents an advertisement's effect upon an audience, doubling the audience. Theodore's desire to be known and understood makes him the target audience of its advertisement. The symmetry between the romantic fantasy's simplification of life and the promise of technology in social reproduction begins here. "Light," the metaphor for love that Theodore used in his opening letter, is repurposed by the advertisement, again foreshadowing his romantic relationship to Samantha (10:0311:06) at the same time as it serves as the objective correlative of his fantasy.

Exiting the subway train on a commute home, Theodore emerges into a cavernous corridor lined with television screens, part of a multi-media ad installation. The screens in the subway have attracted a crowd who stare up at the monitor, mirroring the audience and the cinema (or monitor) screen. The ad playing shows disoriented,

chaotic, and troubled people dressed in contemporary business-casual clothing, rushing in different directions in a desert environment. The movie-ad-within-a-movie presents an expansive space in which human activity is alienated, disconcerted, and, from the faces of the people depicted, deeply anxious. The ad implies that contemporary urban life is a confusing desert of the real. The urban yuppie faces in the ad are calmed, however, as a light emerges onto the desert like a sunrise; they are pacified as they turn toward it. A disembodied and sagacious masculine voice (Brian Johnson) delivers the voice-over, which advertises “An intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you. It's not just an operating system, it's a consciousness.” (10:15 – 11:04). In this phrase, the ad suggests that Element Software's commodity will meet Theodore’s need for love, but without directly marketing romance. As Eva-Lynn Jagoe writes in “Depersonalized Intimacy: The Cases of Sherry Turkle and Spike Jonze:” “We believe ourselves to be self-producing individuals and are attached to fantasies of romantic love that entail a transparency and deep sharing of self” (Jagoe 171); the movie not only recognizes the articulation of what Povinelli called “the autological subject” to “the intimate event”, but suggests that, in the utopic world of the near-present, such needs are met on the market.

Her elucidates the neoliberal ideal of romance in the city for an office-worker whose material needs are already met. The world of comfort that is the setting of *Her* provides a view into the idealism that fuels its romance; considering setting is not only crucial because it situates Theodore within his world – enabling an analysis of the movie as a class fantasy – but because it contrasts a beautiful and vibrant urban life with Theodore’s isolation and unmet desires – until he falls in love. Director and writer Spike Jonze, in an “Academy Conversation” with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, situates the movie’s love story and concern with alienation within this anodyne vision:

> This idea that we were trying to make this very warm, tactile world, with the materials and fabrics and the woods, and create this world that felt like this utopic world that everything’s nice and everything’s comfortable and even in this world where you’re getting everything you need and having this nice life, there’s still loneliness and longing and disconnection.
>
> (“Academy Conversations” 7:45-8:00)

Jonze's comments emphasize touch, enlisting the visual representation of texture ("materials and fabrics") in a project of comfort. This is one way in which the movie's aesthetics counteract the lingering trope of A.I. and their worlds as cold and distant. The movie succeeds in this regard, through visuals as much as through sound design: there is a texture to Johannson's vocals that forestalls accusations of machine-likeness. As Hilary Bergen insists, "Scarlett Johansson's signature voice is every bit the anti-Siri; it has depth, cracks, sincerity. Yet, such a well-known voice ensures a certain public reception of Samantha, as a hyper sexualized, young, white woman" (5). At the same time, Jonze's world of comfort, built on touch, is not perfect: people are alienated and touch is withdrawn. Importantly, Jonze does not situate his reimagined world at the end of a drastic shift, but rather as an extension of present society:

> Much like our world, but just a heightened version of our world, where everything is getting nicer as the years go. There's more design and there's more convenience and our technology is making things easier, but there's still this loneliness." ("Academy Conversations 8:00-8:17).

This idealistic (or is it ideological?) view of contemporary life is redeployed throughout the movie, not only in Jonze's directing and screenwriting: it is the basis of Samantha and Theodore's supposedly "free" romance. This emphasis on loneliness leads up to the movie's love story and is the desire that Samantha (temporarily) meets, like a commodity at market.

Yet to highlight "loneliness" as the exception to an otherwise satisfying world is to dramatically misrepresent the conditions of life under neoliberalism. What Jonze refers to as "our world, where everything is getting nicer as the years go" is the same one in which 20.4% of L.A. residents lived in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau n.p.). The movie omits this, however; instead, we see the consuming middle classes, and the movie does not even *hint* at the rampant inequity that characterizes contemporary L.A.. Jonze's remarks are not an accurate characterization of contemporary society, but this is only a minor point: instead, note how the concern with loneliness is posited as what Raymond Williams called a "structure of feeling," and offers a kind of universality that obscures its racialized and classed assumptions. Not broadly distributed precarity, not financial crisis, not rising inequality, and certainly not environmental degradation or hyper-exploitation constitute the *zeitgeist* of the 2010s, but rather, Jonze insists, social alienation, epitomized in the dissolution of the romantic couple. Jonze here suggests both the way

that the contradictions of neoliberal social reproduction register as social alienation for its privileged subjects, and the way that social alienation is counteracted by romantic relations routed through consumption. The omissions required to sustain this perspective are exemplified in the movie's settings, which operate as what Oakland University media and urban studies professor Brendan Kredell calls the cinema of gentrification, in which "the cinematic city is abstracted and aestheticized, presented to the viewer as a romanticized and essentialized space rather than an organic environment inhabited by real people" (Kredell 84). Within this anodyne vision, social problems disappear.

The movie's production designer, K.K. Barrett, illustrates the extent to which such a cinematic product is not only intentional, but purposefully abstracted from the city, in an interview with an unnamed *Curbed* Los Angeles staff member:

> The future LA is convenient, comfortable, and bespoke. We cleaned up the city—we took away things that weren't of interest—and celebrated buildings and architecture that were of interest to us. In *Her* it's a new city with curvaceous buildings and things that amuse us rather than things that felt brute. (Curbed)

Barrett's discourse carries the metaphors of colonization and masculinity, and the film enacts the aesthetic of amusement and interest for its characters and its audience. Barrett's city is an environment custom-made for the urban gentrifying class of professional and managerial workers, with Theodore as its representative.

Figure 5. Still from Jonze, *Her* (2013).

The city is “bespoke” for this subject: “the production design is wrapped around Theodore and becomes part of his character—and the bubble he lives in” (Curbed). Barrett’s approach to shooting lo cations epitomizes “the cinema of gentrification”:

> So we collaged buildings together—we found buildings we liked—Pudong had the best visuals we could find—and it didn't matter that it was China. We selectively edited our collection of buildings into our film to make our new world—and we took out things we didn't want to show. And it becomes a new whole. (*Curbed*)

A special economic zone established as a government district in 1993, Pudong provides, for the filmmakers of *Her*, a complement to L.A.'s architecture, a replacement for the “brute” bits of actually-existing Los Angeles. What the filmmakers “didn't want to show” from Los Angeles is replaced with Pudong. The world Barrett remakes is composed of fragments composed to evoke the world of comfort Jonze mentions. As Jessica Ellicott writes in a review for *4:3 Film*, the role of Pudong within this abstract city is significant:

> Mmany of the exterior shots in *Her* can be readily located in the skyscraper-littered, *Blade Runner*-esque Pudong district of Shanghai, where just over

> two decades ago stood largely undeveloped swampland. Now China's predominant commercial hub and home to its tallest buildings, Pudong is the strongest possible outward representation of the dramatic transformation brought about since 1978 by China's economic reform. The astonishing rate and scale of Pudong's development makes it an extremely fitting location for Jonze's utopia (or dystopia), bestowing the technological developments suggested in *Her*'s world of the "slight future" with a poignant plausibility. (n.p.)

Following Ellicott's reading, Pudong might symbolize Chinese neoliberalism; read this way, the fusion of LA and Pudong could be understood as an aesthetic mediation of neoliberalism's dream of globalization. While the open Sinophobia that characterizes contemporary politics in the U.S.A. is absent from the movie, its representational politics are squarely "inclusive" without ceding the centrality of whiteness to either its narrative or its perspective. Whatever problems might exist are muted and differences co-exist peacefully.

In contrast with this sunny vision, Mike Davis' *City of Quartz* [1990] presents a social history of Los Angeles that outlines how the real-world analogues for this imaginary space are maintained; through displacement enacted by the combination of real estate development and technologized policing. More than 30 years ago, Davis referred to Los Angeles' "Downtown" as "the nation's largest corporate citadel, segregated from the poor neighborhoods around it by a monumental architectural glacis" (Davis 223). The freedom that Theodore experiences – and which is essential to the film's cinematography of advertising – is built on a repressive apparatus that the film itself does not address, and which is only perceptible in its absence. What Davis wrote of late 1980s L.A. is true also of the procession of settings in *Her*:

> The downtown hyperstructure . . . is programmed to ensure a seamless continuum of middle-class work, consumption, and recreation, without unwanted exposure to Downtown's working-class street environments. (231)

This future L.A. is beautiful and free, but each are guaranteed by the police state: in "post-liberal[117] Los Angeles . . . the defense of luxury lifestyles is translated into a proliferation of new repressions in space and movement, undergirded by the ubiquitous 'armed response'" (Davis 223). As Davis observes of L.A. "'security' has less to do with

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[117] What Davis calls "post-liberal" for its movement away from "the emollient of class struggle" (Davis 224) is what I am characterizing as neoliberal throughout my dissertation.

personal safety than with the degree of personal insulation, in residential, work, consumption and travel environments, from 'unsavory' groups and individuals, even crowds in general" (Davis 224); this is how Theodore moves through the world of *Her*.

Davis' critique of class separation in the city through urban design applies also to

Barrett's aesthetic: instead of separating the physical spaces through architecture, Barrett does so through editing, and rather than police executing street sweeps the camera does the cleanup. Barrett situates Theodore as "floating—surrounded by the density of the big city but not claustrophobic" (n.p.). According to Barrett, this is accomplished through Theodore's apartment and its large windows – precisely what are *missing* from Caleb's room at the compound in *Ex Machina*. The tower in downtown L.A. that serves as Theodore's apartment in *Her* is the WaterMarke Tower. In the summer of 2019, the management listed two-bedroom apartments such as his for $5,269USD a month; prospective residents would need an income of $158,070USD per year to be eligible to apply ("Availability"). According to Pew Research Center's income calculator, this income would situate Theodore in the top 17% of earners in L.A. (Fry and

Kouchhar), just over double the $69,300 median *family* income in L.A. as estimated by US Housing and Urban Development in 2018 (HUDuser.gov; my emphasis). *Her*'s spaces are inhabited by what Richard Florida calls the "creative class," but the film offers an impossibly aspirational view of the economics of creative life in the 21st century. *Ex Machina* inverts this plenitude: Caleb complains to Ava during one of their interview that despite his job at Blue Book his apartment is "very small," a far more realistic portrait of tech-worker life than the one depicted for Theodore. Theodore is the equivalent of a custom greeting-card writer, and Amy is a game designer, but in the characteristic Hollywood glorification of professional life they both live in massive apartments; even after their marriages end, financial worries are not mentioned. One *Salt Lake Tribune* reviewer unironically read the dissonance between this representation of largesse and contemporary tech worker salaries as an indicator that Jonze's future

L.A. must have removed zoning restrictions and increased the supply of condo housing thereby driving down prices (Dalrymple).[118]

Reflecting the "abject"[119] position of unwaged reproductive work within neoliberalism, the utopic city of *Her* reduces the work of love to sexuality, emotional support, and digital consumer work, while *Ex Machina*'s domestic space within a research compound re-grounds the extraction of domestic and sexual labour as supports for the neoliberal subject. The expansive shots of *Her* are reproduced in the outdoor cinematography of *Ex Machina*, which has glacial peaks, rushing waterfalls, and huge open sky – though each is tinged with menace. But the movie's interior spaces are divided: there are moments where the dynamics of an open-plan office and the dim claustrophobia of domestic space play off one another, and each is haunted by security technology. Like *Her, Ex Machina* begins in an office, softly lit, though more shadowy: the contrast of bright neon, dimness and cool tones immediately evokes a sci-fi atmosphere (e.g. *Blade Runner*) set in the same kind of open-plan workspace that Theodore inhabits.

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[118] Supply-side economics have been crucial to contemporary gentrification, in L.A. as much as elsewhere; removing zoning restrictions opens land to density-driven developments. Catering to the wealthy at the same time as they remove older housing stock, these developments drive prices upward. As prices rise, residents who cannot afford the new rents are displaced, in the literal enactment of Barrett's cinematic cleanup. As I write this in 2023, the neighbourhood where I live is continuously remade by developers whose freedom to remake is justified by such arguments.

[119] My usage of the term "abject" in this chapter follows Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton's within "The Logic of Gender," to refer to work that, once waged, is no longer profitable for capital or provided by the state. It has been "cast off, but from something it is a part of," and as they point out, one front of feminist struggle has moved to the organization of the abject. Further, when their "directly market-mediated" and "indirectly market-mediated" division is applied as a specification of and counter to the split between productive and reproductive work. The reproductive/productive split, despite its inadequacies, shows something that the DMM/IMM split does not: the "use-value character" of a task enables us to understand the extent to which neoliberalism translates its own conditions of possibility into sources of profit.

Figure 6. Still from Garland, *Ex Machina* (2014).

Caleb, like Theodore, begins the movie at his computer, only to be interrupted by an email about the staff lottery he has won. He does not turn around to celebrate or speak to his co-workers, though, he reaches for his Blue Book smartphone to share the news – *especially* in the workplace, the smartphone mediates sociality. But what are, in *Her,* Theodore's means to romance - the wireless connectivity, the processing power of the AI, the video camera and phone - are here the means of subjection. The camera immediately shifts perspective, and suddenly we look out from the smartphone Caleb is holding: we get a denaturalized, splotchy, technological view, distinct from the assumption of “natural” representation that the cinematic camera enacts. The succeeding shot of the PC’s camera atop Caleb’s monitor emphasises the presence of surveillance, yet without assigning a subject: we do not know *who* is surveilling Caleb. As we learn later, these recordings of Caleb are part of the dataset Ava’s neural network learns from. This movement from the seemingly ‘natural’ shot of Caleb at his desk to the first-person to the third-person evokes paranoia, a dynamic Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* notices in 20th century film noir. Yet there is a crucial difference between the way this shot works, and the one Ngai analyses in *Ugly Feelings* (30)*.* Instead of a rotation from first- to third- person within a single shot, as Ngai observes in the film she considers, the shot in *Ex Machina* relies on frequent cuts. Instead of the slow realization that a character is being watched, we are immediately presented with the multiple perspectives that the movie will evoke and the ubiquity of digital recording.

Figure 7 Still from Garland, *Ex Machina* (2014).

The uptake in this difference is that not only is Caleb being watched, but we do not know by whom, and we cannot know (despite learning, by the movie's end, that Nathan and Ava, at least, had access to this data). By extension, this mode of being-watched does not apply *only* to Caleb but to all of us; it registers our subjection via surveillance and data that the smartphone induces.

Figure 8. Still from Garland, *Ex Machina* (2014).

Figure 9. Still from Garland, *Ex Machina* (2014).

Romantic love entails a desire to be known that is only met through the recognition of the beloved. The data that is the price of admission to smartphone technologies includes not only intentionally recorded communication, but the data we do not know we produce, records of habits we do not recognize we have, and even the shape of our desire that we turn to search engines[120] like Blue Book to provide. Data allows the neoliberal subject to be known, and data makes A.I. the ideal interlocutor for recognizing that subject's desire, even beyond their own self-knowledge. Here, the smartphone and its data allow Samantha to enact Theodore's desires and follow the trajectory of his fantasies.

Ex Machina evokes a hybrid work and domestic space as a theatre for a gendered power struggle mediated by surveillance and security technology – the same ones that Davis implicates in his criticism of neoliberal L.A., but here privatized. Nathan does not, at first, describe the technological palace as a compound or a research facility, but as his "house," establishing the domestic character of his fantasy, and the movie's commentary [7:35]. The compound of *Ex Machina* is full of locked doors, restricted access, and cramped spaces, and the navigation of those spaces is integrated into the power struggle at the heart of the plot that frames Ava's romance with Caleb. While Nathan seems, at first, to be in control of the compound and Caleb's movement through it, the electronic system that he utilizes to maintain that control can be overloaded by

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[120] Alois Sieben argues in his PhD Dissertation, *Search Results: The Subject of Google in 2010s Culture,* that this relationship is not unlike the psychoanalytic relation.

Ava. Where Theodore's relationship to technology allows for seamless movement throughout the city and beyond, extending his subjectivity, Caleb is subject to that technology (and its human or A.I. controller) for his own freedom.

Caleb's room is laid out like a fancy hotel, but Nathan almost immediately assumes Caleb is unhappy with it; Nathan describes the space as "claustrophobic" because it lacks windows. This inversion of Barrett's production design choices for *Her* signals Caleb's restriction as visual in addition to spatial. The way Nathan explains this further embeds the paranoia of surveillance within the movie's narrative: the room lacks windows because he is not in a home, he is in a "research facility" with walls full of fibre optic cable [8:55]. That oscillation between house and research facility establishes the twin lenses through which the movie makes its commentary: domestic and work settings frame each of its relationships, but the object of the research is the production of appropriately subservient gendered and racialized A.I. Almost immediately, Nathan claims to understand Caleb's emotions: he understands that Caleb is "freaked out" and assumes that this is caused by the opulence of the estate and the fact of meeting Nathan. Nathan claims to appreciate "the moment you're having" and, somewhat rhetorically, asks if they "can just get past that; can we just be two guys, Nathan and Caleb, not the whole employer-employee thing?" [7:10-15]. The equality between subjects that *Her* assumes – to the point that it overrides the owner-property relation of its central romance – is here the cynical object of a deception. Nathan is projecting his own self-image, but as that is wrapped up in his identity as CEO, he demonstrates what Binkley refers to as "institutional empathy," part of the ongoing process of subject-formation:

The audio-visual surveillance equipment that the office scene emphasizes becomes ubiquitous as soon as Caleb reaches Nathan's residence. Nathan's technologically-enabled control of space is introduced as a form of subjection, through which Nathan's authority will be asserted and maintained – and eventually undone. As if rehearsing Althusser's notion of interpellation, Caleb is hailed on arrival, by name, by an automated (feminized) voice; he is photographed without warning and issued a keycard, which will both allow him access to the compound and restrict it. As he enters, the camera lingers on the magnetic lock, foreshadowing his later entrapment there. Caleb is a good subject: he enters slowly, and when he bumps a rotating chair in the welcome

area he returns it to its place. When he finds Nathan – working out his hangover on a punching bag – he is hailed the same way, with his full name.

> Indeed, so glad are we, as emotional subjects, to be readmitted to the realm of organizational life through that organization's great act of empathy, that we assume ourselves to be precisely that subject of emotions, one who is glad to be given permission to feel, emote and share in the context of an institution that understands us. The supplemental gift of the caring institution is one that brings a subjectifying effect: we become the subject of emotions as we absorb the supplement of organizational empathy. (Binkley 15)

Caleb agrees, almost saying "yes sir" – he has been so conditioned to his own subjection in the workplace that he can only set its language aside with effort. Nathan's anticipation of Caleb's needs continues during Caleb's welcome tour. Nathan insists that limiting Caleb's access will make his stay "easy" for him because he will not need to ask where he can and cannot go: the pass he is given relieves the pressures of sovereignty, it subjects Caleb to the spatial and social relations already established, and it serves as a technology of patriarchal authority. The keycard's theft from a drunken Nathan later in the movie is what enables Caleb to open the door to Ava's room: the symbol of masculine power is seized, and the movie thus invites an Oedipal reading that Ava first prompts and then disrupts. Caleb's subjection is legally secured when he reluctantly signs an NDA at Nathan's prodding – the price of learning what, exactly, is being researched at this facility. The movie thus hints at the way data is part of subject formation when the NDA allows Blue Book "regular data audit with unlimited access" to ensure his non-disclosure. Though Caleb is eventually a rebellious subject, his reliance on Nathan's authority – and the technological means by which it is secured – result in his desubjectification in the compound's technological tomb.

Romance may be fraught, in *Her*, but it is always a surplus, an extension of a world of material surplus. Not only is the world of *Her* plentiful, but the elements of romantic love bound up with necessity – the compromises, free work, and material determinants of relationships – are absented from the narrative. Most of the movie is set inside an apartment, and not once is anyone shown doing housework. The absence of housework in *Her* can be understood as the embodiment of a bourgeois fantasy of a world without drudgery (thanks to unrepresented domestic labour), but also as a particularly neoliberal fantasy that social reproduction will just *happen*, where housework disappears yet the movie's setting relies on it. The transcendence of housework would

indeed be a novum in Darko Suvin's terms, but this is more likely an extension of the editing out of such work as "uninteresting." Such an editing practice might, in this case, more specifically be understood as an aesthetic version of the shifting attitude toward reproductive activities under neoliberalism that Fraser highlights, or more precisely the abjection that Neton and Gonzalez theorize. That the world of *Her* is not only habitable but beautiful without this work shows it to be an elaboration of a neoliberal imaginary. Samantha's romantic role within *Her* exists within a world where "abject" work is written out, unrepresented, while the entirety of what Samantha does is unwaged; that is, the unwaged work of reproduction that this movie does depict is still organized by the overlap between romantic fantasy and technophilia. But Theodore does not *need* the housework of Fordism's imaginary housewife, because he lives within the ideological world of neoliberalism. Yet he still wants romance, and the work that Samantha provides includes the organizational capacity she brings to his electronic data, editing help at work, and consumer work (her ability to choose fitting commodities and restaurants).

Whether you read this as typical Hollywood glamourization or a more specific extension of the production design, it omits what Barrett refers to as "things not of interest." Those omissions are crucial to the movie's focus on romantic politics: interpersonal relations become the most important conflict. But Samantha is not only situated as complementing Theodore's working life (reproducing his labour-power *as well as* doing some of his work for him, as Mackereth points out): their romance meets Theodore's desires in ways that his relations to human women could not. Her A.I. status thus enables a super-human emotionality that is lacking in the human women Theodore fails to romance, which represent broader tropes of neoliberal romance.

The lack of intimacy that inheres neoliberal sexuality as mediated by internet technology is succinctly illustrated in the parodic chatroom encounter between Theodore and "SexyKitten" (voiced by Kristen Wiig) early in the movie – this is, among his other failed relationships with human women, why Theodore turns to Samantha for his romantic desires. The scene is primarily a close shot of Theodore's face as he lies on his bed, focusing the audience's gaze on his expressions. As Sydnee Lyons points out, Theodore initiates the sexual encounter by implying "that he would not ask for consent" (n.p.), but his assumptions of power are reversed – like those Replika users troubled by sexually aggressive chatbots – when "SexyKitten" asks him to describe choking her with a dead cat. Not only does this request dramatically recast her username, but it deflates

Theodore's desire; particularly since the movie cuts to fantasy-scenes of the model he saw through his phone on the train. Despite his hesitation, he accommodates anyway, though it is visibly unpleasant for him: the scene concludes with Theodore lying about having an orgasm before "SexyKitten" hangs up after loud exclamations of pleasure, and he is left staring at the ceiling, disturbed (9:45). Awkward and cringe-worthy, this scene effectively illustrates the social alienation that attends casual sexuality as mediated through smartphone, and, more broadly, internet technologies.

Yet the scene works on several levels, illustrating a lack in Theodore's life that Samantha will fulfill and providing a visual precursor to their auditory sexual exchange later in the movie – the scene that earned the movie an Alliance of Women Film Journalists Award, the EDA. For Flisfeder and Burnham, this is one of the movie's crucial moments, as the failure to reach overlapping fantasies illustrates the Lacanian dictum that there is no sexual relation. What, exactly, prevents their fantasies from overlapping? Death. The image of the "dead cat" mobilizes the taboo against necrophilia to safely enlist the audience in Theodore's disgust: the power of the scene relies upon mobilizing a entire regime of heterosexual normativity – the desire for reproduction as the norm of heterosexuality, death and grief as separate from legitimate sexuality, etc. – through Theodore's face. The audience may mirror or may transform his disturbed image into laughter in the defining reactions of cringe-worthy comedy, but throughout the scene Theodore is depicted as a *normative* sexual subject, oriented toward heteronormative reproduction.

"SexyKitten"'s lack of concern for Theodore is also the reversal of a tired patriarchal sexual script, the one his opening line suggested with its assumption of consent. This is the same script that empowers Samantha with superhuman emotionality, and the same one Ava reverses when she leaves Caleb behind. The scene could equally be a textbook example of Eva Illouz's argument from *The End of Love: a Sociology of Negative Relations* about the integration of casual sexuality as an egalitarian demand within neoliberal sexuality. Illouz reminds us that "Egalitarian politics was the source of casual sex as a new social form, legitimate for both genders" despite the cultural coding of casual sex as masculine (Illouz 71). The appropriation of casual sexuality is presented as a form of equality, as women make "the same assertion of detachment" previously valid only for men (72). Illouz's argument about the practice of casual sex also resonates with Fraser's theorization of neoliberalism's articulation of

feminism to global capitalism, where the abandonment of reproductive duties (as inhibiting of full subjectivity) is signalled by the content of SexyKitten's fantasy. Yet the content is only part of the story: the termination of the encounter after orgasm refuses responsibility for Theodore's emotional state, modifying patriarchal sexual temporality. But Illouz links this feminist demand to the dynamics of consumption:

> If casual sex has been a mark of feminist politics, it is because it mimics male power, as it is a trope of autonomy and signals the capacity to detach, to look solely for one's pleasure, to obliterate care and reciprocity (the traditional signposts of feminine identity), and to pursue market subjectivity. (73)

The synchronicity with neoliberalism's *homo oeconomicus* is remarkable: not only is "market subjectivity" practiced in sexual relations, but Gary Becker's economic reframing of consumption as the production of one's satisfaction aligns the activity of casual sex as a production of pleasure for the hedonic body of neoliberal subjectivity. This self-centred dynamic drives the sexual fantasies that AI romances re-enact, since a language processing model does not require "care," whatever its outputs. Booting up a romantic A.I. may mediate romantic connection, but it does so by sidestepping the political negotiations that are required to sustain any voluntary social relation; in this, the antisociality of the couple-form asserts itself in the guise of technophilia.

Through *Her*, *Ex Machina*, and the users of Replika, this chapter reads the cultural phenomenon of AI romances as index of, and intervention within, neoliberalism's crisis of social reproduction. Premised on a particular family form, yet applied to social contexts in which that form cannot cohere, consumption becomes the privileged solution to subject's emotional lack. As the economization of everything renders emotions exchangeable; utility and calculation pervade interpersonal relations. Such a world can only render "a sign of the authentic self" such as love (Schaffer) into a commodity, much as Steven Shaviro suggested of "sincerity" in his review of *Her*:

> Jonze shows neoliberal subjectivity's self-deluding idealization of itself as total sincerity, maintaining this emotional nakedness and yearning within the parameters of a world in which 'sincerity' can itself only be a commodity, or a form of human capital to bring on the market (n.p.).

For Shaviro, the turn to sincerity in the movie is a reaction to cynical reason's status as the official affect of neoliberal capitalism, though an ineffective one. The movies' opposed approaches to A.I. romance (idealized and cynical, respectively) represent the

emotional gestalt of contemporary neoliberalism, suggesting and undercutting the self-defeating practice of embracing one's own desire as it is canalized by the rhythms of capitalist consumption.

Afterword: on Love as Politics

As a word designating affection and care, and widely upheld as a social panacea, love has frequently been situated as a potential catalyst for political change or a basis for new social relations. While often grounded in imagery of romantic love, this political love is not limited to the couple, and is upheld as a feeling that, despite being personal, can knit together a social fabric. This afterword, more a polemical excursus than a chapter, considers the situation of love within revolutionary politics, examining how the term has been differently used within projects of political liberation. In this aside I argue that love cannot form the core of a revolutionary politics, at least within the economizing movements of neoliberal capitalism. Further, an examination of revolutionary thinkers' engagement with love reveals a set of contradictory demands for a politics of love, contradictions that, I argue, foreclose love's potential as a political signifier within capitalism more broadly.

Love is metonym for the political values we uphold: for Alain Badiou's *In Praise of Love* "love (between two) is the minimal communism" while Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Commonwealth* situates love as the foundation of new social institutions after capitalism, suggesting that love could form an alternative to the organization of society by capital (or, more specifically, the money-form of value). For them, the oppressions of Empire turn "rebellion into a project of love" (*Empire* 413); but they make it clear that love first needs some "conceptual housecleaning" before it can become "a force to combat evil" (*Commonwealth* 189-99). This is where love becomes essentialized, as Berlant argues in "A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages." Berlant's friendly critique of Hardt points out the bifurcation required for love to become a transformative political concept: "narcissism" must be separated from "openness to transformation," where "being-with" is not "profiting-from" (Berlant 684). When theorizing, the hazards of essentialism risk sterilizing this "magnetic idea" (Berlant 683), divorcing it from its vernacular – particularly in the case of love, when the term is loaded with positive judgment. My chapters illustrate the ways that romantic love serves

as a “secular religion” for liberalism (Povinelli), but only hinted at the ways love more broadly serves as a form of neoliberal damage control[121].

The corrosive effects of neoliberalism are not limited to economics but have eviscerated political life within liberal democratic governments (Brown). The social importance of romantic love that this dissertation has outlined is thus contoured by a political effect of neoliberalization: hollowing out or removing the mechanisms by which gains were made for social movements in the 20th century has undone the potential for “rule by the people” (Brown). Whether movements are liberal or not, the ability to effect democratic change through the state has been and continues to be undercut by neoliberalism. As Brian Kuan Wood argues in “Is It Love?”, the shrinking of political horizons prompts a turn toward immanent forms of political struggle, toward love:

> It is often said that we no longer have an addressee for our political demands. But that’s not true. We have each other. What we can no longer get from the state, the party, the union, the boss, we ask for from one another. And we provide (Chan et al 17).

As state systems have abandoned what Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz* called “the emollient of class struggle” (citation needed), the flows formerly regulated by state authority do not *only* fall to capital. As Povinelli insists, “the intimate event is only incoherently linked to these institutional orders” (Povinelli 182) but nevertheless is invoked in complementary relation to them. As Wood insists, we turn to each other, but “these solidarities are the very essence of what regulates the flows of value and compensate for its inconsistencies through promises, favors—the handshake or the handjob” (Wood n.p.). Wood, like Berlant, is ambivalent about love, contrasting Thatcher’s “argument for true love—not the state-subsidized universal love [but] . . . Family and friends, a true conservative love” with the context of diminished life under neoliberalism, where “there is very little to be given or received other than affection and emotional support, promises and white lies, and maybe even some personal ethics to hold it all together in the meantime” (Wood). Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* explores the contemporary “impasse” created by the breakdown of the social democratic compromise: with the constituent parts of “the good life” each growing inaccessible,

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[121] I borrow part of this phrase from Gayatri Spivak’s *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, where she insists that “globalization takes place in capital and data. Everything else is damage control” (1).

affective relations of cruel optimism characterize our attachment to love. Yet in romantic love, neoliberal subjects establish a limit to social solidarity at the same time as they demand personal responses to political demands. Rather than an extension of the feminist dictum "the personal is political," I suggest, like Spivak, that this amounts to "*only* the personal is political" (qtd in Danius 35). Love counteracts the downward push of neoliberal cuts and papers over the social antagonisms neoliberalism exacerbates.

An ambivalent approach is necessary, then, to hold the tensions of love's vernacular. Yet when a term is a marker of social value, those tensions dissolve into a binary – good or bad, useful or useless, revolutionary or complicit. Instead, I have tried to demonstrate the productivity of holding the tension between love's selflessness and selfishness, between its social and anti-social tendencies, between its temporality of now and forever. Partly, this is an attempt to disenchant love of the social worship frequently offered it within popular culture, so that actually-existing love can fly free of the forged futures set for it within neoliberalism. Yet to see what potential love might have, freed of the couple and capital, is a project of *imagination* for those of us encircled by capitalist abstraction. Berlant writes that "Love is not entirely ethical, if it has any relation to desire, which it must, if it is to be recognizable as love" (685). Here, Berlant seems to be in dialogue with Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he situates love as a "gift of self" or "the ultimate stage … of ethical orientation" (28). To define love in such a way is to cast dubious judgment on many supposedly loving relations when they demonstrate their unethical orientation. Fanon's love is social, connecting regard and relation to personal values, and connecting that *orientation* to judgment and perception. Fanon insists "the need to earn the admiration or the love of others will erect a value-making superstructure on my whole vision of the world" (24). Sonder (the recognition that the Other is as internally complex as the Subject) internalized through the ethical orientation of love has ever-broadening effects.

Love is thus implicated in a knot of philosophical, social, and economic questions. Fanon's definition of love is a response to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, and its loveless world is the prompt for Fanon's definition: "true, authentic love—wishing for others what one postulates for oneself, when that postulation unites the permanent values of human reality—entails the mobilization of psychic drives basically freed of unconscious conflicts" (28). To situate love as only achievable *after* such a liberation reinforces the critique implicit in Fanon's definition of love: *Black Skin,*

White Masks demonstrates the "unconscious conflicts" that proliferate under colonial capitalism. Yet Fanon's understanding of love as only possible after psychological liberation seems to elide some of the tensions internal to love. Berlant addresses this through analogy: "If in capitalism 'greed is good,' so too in love the inconvenient appetites must be given their genres" (685). Berlant's analogy between the emotional economy of neoliberalism – which far more than its Keynesian predecessor stimulates the impulse to endlessly accumulate [greed] – and "the inconvenient appetites" of love such as jealousy and narcissism suggests that the imbrication of feeling with capitalism is not merely a parasitic extraction of love's surplus. Neither can love form a basis for ethics, entwined as it is with desire and endowed as it is with hope for the future.

Many thinkers of the 20th century invoked love in an essentialized form – a "strategic essentialism" in Spivak's usage of the term – yet their usages of love are often emphasised over their practices. While only a minor note within Che Guevara's *Socialism and Man* and his thought more broadly, Guevara writes that revolutionaries are to be guided by "great feelings of love" that draw them away from the daily affections of bourgeois life. As Dierdra Reber argues in "Love as Politics: *Amores Perros* and the Emotional Aesthetics of Neoliberalism," the image of Guevara as a revolutionary motivated primarily by love, as depicted in Stephen Soderbergh's *Che, El Argentino*, overemphasises the importance of love to Guevara's political discourse. Reber identifies a move away from the content of revolutionary love to an "abstract concept of love" that Soderbergh turns into "a tender motif". Such a shift illustrates "the conceptual prominence and political status granted to love in our current moment" rather than its importance within revolutionary praxis. This is particularly heinous as a treatment of Che's work, since he argues that the family must be left for "the love of the people, of the most sacred causes" and this includes the willingness to do violence against the oppressor, including even killing one's own family if necessary – hardly the tender motif of the film. This version of love, a guerrilla doctor's ally, illustrates not only how contradictory are the loves of our contemporary cultural lexicon, but also the ways that the reinventions of love for political purposes have been re-appropriated, defanged, and idealized. Martin Luther King Jr. works through this problematic from a Christian perspective in *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community,* arguing:

> What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at

> its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love. (King 37)

King's criticism of the power/love binary sets the two in relation, an aspirational articulation hegemonized by love as a liberatory value *only* when backed by power. Indeed, love without power – at the simplest level – is only conceivable as a subjective feeling.

The political contestation of love's meanings has only intensified since King wrote. Reber suggests that this is pervasive: "a political aesthetic of love may in fact be hegemonic to mainstream and contestatory neoliberal discourse alike" (282). Sara Ahmed's *Cultural Politics of Emotion* suggests that this is part of politics itself, which involves a struggle over who is allowed to speak or act in the name of love. Ahmed considers not only how white supremacists have rebranded in the name of love, but also how multiculturalism in the U.K. tries to make love of the "other" into the basis of community belonging. In each case, Ahmed points out, the idealized community sets the loving subject as oriented and moving "toward" something, a movement aligning individuals with a collective, a political body. But as Ahmed shows, the belonging that a "politics of love" entails – whether in the white supremacist love of likeness or multicultural love of the other – relies on an ideal version of love, and "the existence of others who have failed that ideal," so that a politics of love operates on exclusion (124).

We, the good ones who love, must distinguish ourselves from those others who do not. Because love works on this exclusion, Ahmed challenges "any assumption that love can provide the foundation for political action, or is a sign of good politics." Ahmed suggests a turn away from love to "the resistance to speaking in the name of love, in the recognition that we do not simply act out of love, and in the understanding that love comes with conditions however unconditional it might feel" (141). Considering how Ahmed draws on Sigmund Freud to suggest that "love makes the subject vulnerable, exposed to, and dependent upon another, who . . . threatens to take away the possibility of love" (125), there is a bifurcation between the desire for the relation (couple or political alignment) and the desire for the other's well-being. The loss of that love, or the "threat" to it, is the "hurt" that the subject hopes to escape through their lover's commitment. If our feelings' conditionality is the basis of our political connection, we have a capricious solidarity.

To politicize a complex emotion that has contradictory associations is a fraught ideological struggle. Rather than love as politics, Ahmed insists on "a politics of love . . . because how one loves matters; it has effects on the texture of everyday life and on the intimate 'withness' of social relations" (Ahmed 140). Ahmed returns love to the personal, and rather than scale up love to shape political organization she politicizes its practices. bell hooks' trilogy on love (*All About Love: New Visions*, *Communion: the Female Search for Love*, and *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love)* takes a similar approach. These books intervene into romantic common sense, asserting the necessity of loving ethically by distancing love from idealism through an emphasis on ethics. In *All About Love* hooks draws on this form of love: "always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling" (13) and distinguishing the feeling from the action to reframe love as a choice for which people are accountable. Love becomes an intentional act of will that is incompatible with anything like "falling in love." In so doing, hooks defines love *against* the normative romantic fantasy – indeed, hooks situates that fantasy as an impediment to even *thinking* about love. She insists in *Communion: The Female Search For Love* that romantic orientation toward the heterosexual couple and nuclear family is only "an aspect of our overall work to create loving bonds" (xxi), explicitly de-emphasising romantic love. Yet part of hooks' critique is directed at radical feminists that "encouraged [women] to forget about love" (*Communion* 37); instead, hooks challenges romance's hegemony over love on its gendered terrain, reworking the concept and its semantics. Here, as with Fanon, love must first be recuperated. This recuperation of love is widespread, but not universal.

Indeed, cultural theorists consistently offer alternatives. Berlant suggests attachment instead of love as a political concept, pointing to the ways this already subtends social life. Embracing "a form of affective solidarity that admits the irrationality of the principled attachment" (686), Berlant does not uphold love as a political signifier, but is nevertheless interested in a love "without guarantees" that could sustain a leap into an undetermined relationality. There is something special about love, because the love relation is "one of the few situations where we desire to have patience for what isn't working, and affective binding that allows us to iron things out, or to be elastic, or to try a new incoherence" (Berlant "A Properly Political Concept of Love" 685). Thus love is powerful because its "normative utility allows one to want something, to want a world, amid the noise of the ambivalence and anxieties about having and losing that merely

wanting an object generates, even when the object is a political one" (Berlant "A Properly Political Concept of Love" 687). Far from the unity – two become one – that is love's normative practice, wanting "a world" is far beyond the capacity of a couple or individual to meet. That is, it is a collective desire. Ahmed reminds us of solidarity, a bind not based on likeness, but on difference: on disagreement as the basis of connection that Jodi Dean inscribes as "reflective solidarity" (Dean qtd in Ahmed 141). In solidarity, the ideal that unites us is that "different world" that Ahmed and Berlant both indicate – a social world that does not produce the impediments to love – Fanon's "unconscious conflicts" – that register oppression within personal psychologies. Ahmed reminds us that failing to live up to that ideal becomes a condition of contemporary life rather than the basis of exclusion. The incompleteness – of our political signifiers, of our emotional lives – is part of life under a particularly divisive socio-economic system that too easily appropriates our emotional capacities, co-opting love in case of crisis. Should our politics remain tied to moralized emotions, we will continue to reproduce the conditions from which we hope love will save us.

Capitalism's totalizing movements have saturated our feelings with the abstractions of value. Our fantasies emerge fully immersed in an ideology we no longer trust, that of subject, family, nation, and globe, of work and play and rest, of "the good life" we must now cheat to reach. Desires are channeled into consumption until the very functioning of desire is patterned on economy, whose practices are continually rewritten to more efficiently capture the surplus made available in our cycles of satisfaction and denial. In this intensified present, even revolutionaries doubt the possibility of revolution. Here and now, love is both too little and too much for politics. Too little, love cannot stand against empire's violence and value's relentless churn; too much, our own capacities for love have been worn down by the degradation of society. So long as we invest our time, passion, and capital into the form of the couple, larger forms of solidarity – those that must be mobilized for system change – will remain unformed, if not unimaginable.

It may be that we cannot end capitalism in our lifetimes – entrenched as it is within institutions, nations, and the normative practice of billions of human lives. It may be that capitalism will end itself, and most of us with it, through environmental degradation and intensifying warfare as we continue to evolve new destructive processes to serve capital's self-valorization. My work is animated by the fantasy of a

world in which the very subjection to capital reflected in this pessimism will be seen as a relic of a reactionary past. In such a world, love cannot exist as we know it, bound as it is by property and privilege, arriving to us "through the apparatus of gender" as the Infinite Venom Girl Gang observes; in such a world, the couple-form would be seen as a deprivation of human satisfaction and an impediment to collective power, not because it is the sole social relation where the needs of a person can be prioritized, but because it will seem a pale imitation of care within a classless society. Until we make such a world imaginable, the task of an organic intellectual will remain "the ruthless criticism of all that exists" (Marx), love included.

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