The Counter Domestic: The Culture Wars, Welfare Reform, and the Rewriting of the Family in Contemporary American Fiction

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Abstract

How has the representation of the modern American family changed in relation to changes in the political state and economy founded upon domesticity? This dissertation, "The Counter Domestic: Welfare Reform, the Culture Wars, and the Rewriting of the Family in Contemporary American Fiction," traces a strain of contemporary American fiction emerging in the period between Richard Nixon's failed 1969 attempt at welfare reform and Bill Clinton's 1996 signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. I name this emergent genre of fiction "counter-domestic" because it represents the impact that late-twentieth century American economic policy's obsession with privatization, deregulation, and personal responsibility has had on American fiction's attempts to represent and reimagine the form of family. I read novels of the historical period alongside legislative and political documents of the moment—from the Moynihan Report, to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), to Hillary Clinton's *It Takes A Village*—to illuminate how fiction highlights our need to reimagine modes of domesticity and care that constitute the good life. In an era of political obsession with the nuclear family and the perceived crises that confronted the family, counter-domestic fiction attempts to reveal alternative familial formations to the two-parent family of the Fordist era, so often featured and problematized in much of

the most popular domestic fiction. Although the dissident modes of affiliation narrated by the works I explore appear bound to political attempts to *supplement* the Fordist political ideal of the family, I argue that counter-domestic fiction actually *undermines* the ideological emphasis on personal agency and responsibility that the nuclear family is supposed to produce, substituting collectivities that celebrate profligacy, interdependence, and a rejection of capitalist ideologies.

Beyond merely deconstructing the nuclear family model and the social and economic systems resting upon it, however, the counter-domestic novel offers a new horizon of seemingly perverse possibilities for domesticity that ironically appears out of state efforts to reinforce and supplement the formation of two-parent families. While the unlikely "domestic" scenes of the counter-domestic novel—ranging from the corporate board room to adult literacy classes to addiction and terminal illness support groups—appear out of late-capitalism's mania for privatization and deregulation, these scenes threaten to produce unwieldy subjects who do not neatly signify within the parameters of contemporary political discourse. Because these scenes of collectivized domesticity appear out of the biopolitics of so-called neoliberalism, the "counter" in counter-domestic fiction intentionally echoes Michel Foucault's "counter-conduct" and Michael Warner's "counterpublic." For both Foucault and Warner, counter-conduct and counterpublics appear from within established regimes of power to challenge and augment the horizon of possibility. I read the collectivities and counterpublics of these novels through the lens of the domestic because the modes of life and ways of being together represented by these

fictions are produced by neoliberal capital's attempts to sustain and instrumentalize the nuclear family and the hidden labor it performs. I find these counter-domestic formations to be responsive permutations of the domestic itself.

The dissertation includes an introduction and four chapters. The introduction provides an overview of the historical and political forces that have shaped American domestic policy after 1970. The introduction also situates my argument for the genre of counter-domestic fiction within the larger discourse of literary criticism. The first chapter argues that William Gaddis's *J R* represents literary fiction's response to the strains put on the family by the rise of corporate capitalism and Nixon's attempts to dismantle the welfare state in the 1970s. The second chapter defines and argues for the genre of counter-domestic fiction as it emerges alongside the culture wars of the 1990s and the PRWORA, which I read as an attempt to supplement the nuclear family model. The counter-domestic genre, I argue, is exemplified by Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club,* James Fogle's *Drugstore Cowboy,* and Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son* because these texts find viable alternatives to the family in therapeutic support groups that appear as supplements to the family. The third chapter continues to define and consider the genre of counter-domestic fiction by offering readings of Sapphire's *Push* and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* that consider the relationship between catastrophic failures of the nuclear family and self-help narratives. I argue that these texts subvert notions of personal responsibility and self-reliance in order to produce class-consciousness and class belonging rather than upward mobility. In the final chapter, I offer an extensive reading of Helen DeWitt's *The Last*

Samurai in which I consider the novel as a response to Hillary Clinton's *It Takes a Village*. I show how DeWitt's novel radically repurposes public archives and public space in order to imagine new modes of familial affiliation and care that condition bodies and subjects in ways that are not obviously reconcilable with neoliberal capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

The Counter-Domestic: Strange Affinities, Stranger Care, and Feeling at Home with "Aberrance and Noise"

In a 2014 article in *Contemporary Literature*, Nancy Armstrong makes a startling claim that the task of a certain strain of contemporary fiction, as she diagnoses it, is to "expand the readership's sensorium beyond the limits of sympathetic identification; it must move us to acknowledge those with whom we share vital organs yet whom we exclude from the mirroring relationship of sympathy" ("The Affective Turn" 464). The implications of this remarkable claim are multiple and consequential. Armstrong's appearance, as one of the most formidable and influential critics of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British novel, in the pages of *Contemporary Literature* is noteworthy enough in its own right, and Armstrong's commentary on a collection of what she finds to be sympathetically curious contemporary novels, ranging from Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* to Sebald's *Austerlitz* to Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, suggests a complexly up-to-date genealogy of the novel extending from her already foundational work on the genre.[1] In some ways, we might read Armstrong's theorization of the contemporary novel as a moment when the novel as a form comes full circle. Nearly thirty years prior to making this claim in *Contemporary Literature*, Armstrong anointed fiction, domestic fiction in particular, as "both … the document and … the agency of cultural history," claiming that

[1] Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), *How Novels Think: The British Novel and the Limits of Individualism* (2005), and her 2012 article on gender, fiction, and the cultural turn, "Gender Must Be Defended, have been instrumental in shaping my thinking about how the discursive entanglements of the novel, politics, and gender.

"it helped to formulate the ordered space we now recognize as the household, made that space totally functional, and used it as the context for representing normal behavior. In so doing, fiction contested and finally suppressed alternative bases for human relationships. In realizing this, one cannot—I think—ignore the fact that fiction did a great deal to relegate vast areas of culture to the status of aberrance and noise" (*Desire* 24). The normalizing work that Armstrong understands the domestic novel to do—disciplining desire, subject formation, and modes of private and political belonging—is precisely what she claims a certain strain of contemporary fiction undoes when it demands that we extend our sympathetic identification in uncomfortable directions. While it bears noting that the novel no longer holds the monopoly on popular representations of domestic live and that it has largely outsourced this task to films and television, these contemporary novels attempt to blur the once stark boundaries and categories emanating from their domestic predecessors. The contemporary novel, Armstrong argues, asks us to inhabit an affective and sympathetic wilderness—the zone of "aberrance and noise" marked out by a thick accumulation of culturally domestic novels—in order to emerge from it transformed, bewildered, and perhaps capable of new applications of sympathy and the care it might animate.

More substantial than what Armstrong's claim suggests for this recent chapter in the history of the novel, is her implication that these contemporary texts, at least as exemplified by writers like Ishiguro, Coetzee, Sebald, and Sinha, aim to produce representations of human—or at least humanesque—subjects and the affinities and communities that our current interpretative and sympathetic models cannot contain. The

physical and emotional strangeness of her formulation, "those with whom we share vital organs yet whom we exclude from the mirroring relationship of sympathy," demands our confrontation of how we identify and care for (or fail to care for) bodies whom we have reduced to mere biological material and economic fodder, bodies who, in spite of their apparent humanness, aren't encompassed by a shared humanity. This is perhaps the brave new world of neoliberal biopolitics in the twenty-first century that have wrought a post-modernity defined by organs without bodies and bodies without recognizable subjectivities.[2]

If the domestic novel, as Armstrong has it, projects desirable models of (usually feminine) subjectivity, familial belonging, and care, these contemporary novels explode the limits of this desire by showing where, how, and for whom normalized modes of belonging and care utterly fail. Armstrong's radical notion of bodies who share only organs, an idea she comes to via Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, is an invitation for us to unpack what surprisingly perverse practices of affiliation, sympathy, and care might reveal in a historical moment when so-called neoliberal capitalism's chasm of inequity reduces some bodies to the raw material for the flourishing of others.[3] The alienation at work in *Never Let Me Go* is double: the marginalized body of a protagonist is alienated by a fleshy economy from a shared sense of species belonging with the antagonistic bodies who instrumentalize her; at the same time, the contemporary reader of this novel evidently

[2] For an explicit theory of "bodies without organs" see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), pages 149-165. Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, which is the central text in Armstrong's argument, essentially tells the story of clone bodies rendered essentially as only the organs they are grown to donate.

[3] Ishiguro's novel is narrated by Kathy H., a clone who cares for other clones in the aftermath of their organ donations.

comes to a sympathetic impasse, failing to recognize the humanity in either the clones or the bodies who harvest their organs. This must be overcome. "At stake in our relationship to the biopolitical protagonist," Armstrong writes, "is the possibility of a possibility, namely, the possibility of imagining that one can bridge the gap between the restricted dialogue of first and second persons and the kind of somatic intelligence that might enable us to live together" ("The Affective Turn" 463).

What Armstrong sees in these novels, then, is the possibility of a sympathetic quantum leap: the chance that we will be able to somehow find a common identity in these narratives to help us renew and rewrite ways of belonging with each other. But how do the bodies we find in these novels belong together, stripped as they are of subjectivity and autonomy, and for whom politically and culturally sanctioned modes of domestic or familial belonging are not desirable or viable options? What do contemporary novels tell us about the care and belonging that must also happen from inside the "zones of aberrance and noise"? In some ways, this is a simple question: if, as Armstrong suggests in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, the domestic novel of the past few centuries has disciplined and rigidified domestic life, how does the contemporary novel push back on its inheritance? How has the representation of the modern American family changed in relation to changes in the political state and economy founded upon domesticity? In the chapters that follow, I will work to uncover what new modes of domesticity and family life contemporary novels offer as the horizon of affiliative possibilities expands. I also want to track how modes of domestic care change in order to conjecture about the different kinds

of subjects discursively produced and disciplined by different practices of care and biological and ideological reproduction.

The Origin of "Mutual Inclination" and "Affectional Communities"

In the 1848 "Manifesto of the Communist Party," Marx and Engels acknowledged a crisis for the family under capitalism, noting that the bourgeoisie had "torn away from the family its sentimental veil" and revealed it as merely to a set of property relations (476). They go on to note that without access to property, the proletarian is, essentially, without family:

> his relation to his wife and children has no longer anything in common with the bourgeois family relations; modern industry labour, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him of every trace of national character. Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests. (476)

In addition to diagnosing a crisis for the family under a capitalist economic system, this passage evinces Marx's and Engels's complex and conflicted understanding of the family as a social, political, and economic institution that essentially reproduces the state and the relations of production (to borrow from both Jacqueline Stevens and Louis Althusser) as an instrument of the bourgeoisie.[4] The procession from family to industry, economy, nation,

[4] Marx and Engels never seem to offer a unified theory of the family, especially as a natural, i.e., not social or culturally produced form of belonging. What they do offer, Engels in particular in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), is an account of how the family comes to exist as a means of managing private property and extracting free domestic labor. For a detailed accounting of their views on the family, see Stevens's Reproducing the State (1999), pages 27-36, and Melinda Cooper's *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (2017), pages 16-17.

and state—"the bourgeois family relations" immediately followed by "modern industry, modern subjection to capital…England…France…America…Germany—underscores the impossibility of disentangling bourgeois family relations from its subjection to capital. These systems need to be thought together. The Communist Manifesto sees the family as a means to perpetuated and control national character, the inherently capitalistic state, and its cultural institutions and norms.[5] But what does the family become when stripped of its content and meaning? What are the consequences of the family becoming an empty set of relations? In the Manifesto, Marx and Engels almost seem to mourn the hollowing out of the family as a meaningful institution for the proletariat while they simultaneously lay out the troubling ideological reproductions the bourgeois family effects.

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels attempts to think the monogamous family beyond its usefulness as a set of property relations. Engels suggests that after the fall of capital and its attendant property relations, the only remaining motive for marriage and the family as a social formation will be the "mutual inclination" of subjects freed from capital's constricting set of economic relations (144). Engels's optimism about the family as a way of organizing the care of bodies, however, also suggests that the family might exist, in as desirable set of relations in and of itself rather than as a way of organizing exploitable relations. Engels is keen to free the family, and

[5] In his landmark 1970 essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser names the family as an Ideological State Apparatus essential to "renewing the means of production." Stevens's *Reproducing the State* takes up the essentially reproductive relationship between the state and the family, particularly around notions of consent and the ways the family is essential to producing bodies that seem to consent to the conditions of citizenship as it is produces through natality.

women in particular, from the unpaid labor the state is able to extract from the family.[6] He writes:

> The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time. And only now has that become possible through modern large-scale industry, which does not merely permit of the employment of female labor over a wide range, but positively demands it, while it also tends towards ending private domestic labor by changing it more and more into a public industry. (221)

Engels attempts to detach the labor of care and reproduction that the family performs under capitalism from seemingly meaningful personal relationships that inhere in the family's structure. Freed from providing unpaid domestic labor, women can participate in other forms of public production; likewise, the family as an entity could either dissolve or be reimagined under a rubric of "mutual inclination." But the family as an institution has proved more durable than Engels anticipated. By the early nineteenth century, as Eli Zaretzky writes, "work, in the form of wage-labour, was removed from the center of family life, to become the means by which family life was maintained. Society divided and the family became the realm of private life," but this detaching of the family from wage-labor has been incomplete (56). The family continues as a way for the state to extract free domestic labor, and, perversely, supporting and sustaining the unpaid domestic labor that the family conceals is supposed to motivate the typically male wage earner.

[6] Engels understands the monogamous marriage under capitalism to be a fundamentally flawed institution that is in need of supplementation in the form of alienating and exploitative labor, namely, prostitution. See *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and The State*, pages 218-222.

The emergence of capitalism and its system of wage labor obviated the family, in some ways, because individuals no longer needed to depend on a family as a sustaining economic unit for survival. While this liberation of individuals from the family appeared unevenly and often offered no meaningful improvement of material conditions, the receding economic importance of the family for those without intergenerational wealth discloses, or at least should disclose, possibilities for alternative lifestyles. By the 1970s and 80s, as John D'Emilio argues, capitalism's long project of hollowing out the family as a economically sustaining institution enabled the emergence gay identity. "[G]ay men and lesbians," D'Emilio insists, "have not always existed. Instead, they are a product of history, and have come into existence in a specific historical era. Their emergence is associated with the relations of capitalism" (468). The freedom to sell one's own labor, D'Emilio notes, enabled identity to develop around both personal and social relationships that were no longer identical to the economically sustaining relationships available via the family (i.e., husband, wife, parent, child). In spite of the seeming economic obsolescence of the family, however, D'Emilio observes that capitalist society "still needs to push men and women into families to reproduce the next generation of workers. The elevation of the family to ideological preeminence guarantees that capitalist society will produce not just children, but heterosexism and homophobia" (474). This is one way of explaining the neoconservative backlash of the 1980s and 1990s against gay identity that collected itself in a fervor around the idea that the heterosexual family, the dominant nuclear model in particular, was under constant threat not just from emergent queer ways of life but also

from other non-nuclear formations.[7] D'Emilio identifies capitalist society's vexed relationship to the family as the animus behind neoconservative attempts narrowly define what counts as family life as well as the emergence of more emancipatory and equitable "affectional communities," echoing Engels's "mutual inclination" (475). In other words, the crisis for the nuclear family under capitalism enables the formation of extra-familial "affectional communities" that threaten to address and even potentially counteract the social and economic inequalities necessarily perpetuated by capitalism. These "affectional communities" that spring up to replace the family appear as a menace to the existing social order because, as the emergence of gay identity attests, they have the potential to produce and discipline different kinds of subjects with different sets of ideologies and affinities, not unlike the figures Armstrong sees represented in contemporary fiction. The emergence of non-normative identities and ways of life become, essentially, the impetus for Pat Buchanan's famous declaration of "a cultural war" in his infamous 1992 speech to the Republican National Convention.[8]

Melinda Cooper notes that the perceived crisis of the nuclear family by the end of the 1970s, particularly the breakdown of the Fordist family wage, became the basis of a

[7] The racialized threat of the female-headed African American household and the perceived epidemic of fatherlessness that necessitated it was notoriously diagnosed as "A tangle of pathology" by the 1965 "Moynihan Report." This apprehension is echoed by the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which attempts to address, via welfare reform, the persistent problem of out-of-wedlock child birth and single-parenthood. Melinda Cooper notes that "In the 1990s social theorists… announced that the long-standing, quasi-mythical crisis of the African America family, infamously diagnosed by the neoconservative Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965, had now spread to the white middle-class" (7). For an illuminating counter-narrative to Moynihan's conclusions, see Carol Stack's *All Our Kin* (1974), which chronicles the ways that single-parent households and communally administered care appear because of the arcane ways American cash welfare was distributed.

[8] Buchanan's speech, which is commonly known as "The Culture Wars Speech," is simply titled "1992 Republican National Convention Speech." The text of Buchanan's speech is available, under this title, on his website,

"surprising affinity" between neocons and neoliberals on questions of family values, especially as a way of dismissing accusations of persistent structural racism extending not just from American slavery, but also from socially conservative New Deal programs (33).[9] For neoconservatives, the crisis of the American family stems from fatherlessness and perceived erosion of American family values by an increase in out-of-wedlock childbirth and non-monogamous sexual relationships. For neoliberals, Cooper argues, the crisis for the American family is more complicated and centers on the decline of the Fordist family wage, which enabled a single earner, typically a father, to support a family managed by a stay-at-home parent, typically a mother.[10] This structure ostensibly privatizes the cost of population/labor force reproduction by relying on women for the unpaid labor of childcare and household management. Because this family model so effectively ordered and subsidized American life after the end of World War II—with Nobel prize-winning economist and neoliberal hero Gary Becker dubbing the family "the foundation of all civil society"—the breakdown of the Fordist family wage has had wide ranging consequences (1).[11]

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[9] On the causes of the newfound affinity between neoconservatives and neoliberals, Melinda Cooper writes: "As many critics on the left would point out, the Moynihan Report subtly shifted the focus of attention away from the structural factors of segregation, discrimination, and educational disadvantage that might implicate contemporary white racism in the reproduction of poverty and pointed instead to the distant crime of slavery as a causal factor" (38). This is not to say, however, that slavery's role in perpetuating domestic structures at-odds with the two-parent family should be dismissed. For an account of "kinlessness" in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century African American literature, see Nancy Bentley's "The Fourth Dimension: Kinlessness and the African American Narrative" (2009).

[10] "In effect," Cooper writes, "The Fordist family wage not only functioned as a mechanism for the normalization of gender and sexual relationships, but it also stood at the heart of midcentury reorganization of labor, race, and class, defining African-American men by their exclusion from the male breadwinner wage, and African American women by their relegation to agricultural and domestic labor in service of white households" (8).

[11] Becker's claim here is obviously echoed in the opening language of The PRWORA, which states in its "Findings" that "Marriage is the foundation of successful society."

Neoliberalism remains a contentious and inexact designation for global capitalism after 1970, but it does serve as shorthand for the political imperative to formalize all life into economic relations and values.[12] To wit, Becker, in *Treatise on the Family*, offers a formal economic accounting of the roles and relationships of the nuclear family. So while we might find reason for optimism in Engels's "mutual inclination" or in D'Emilio's hope for the "affectional communities" that the decline of the Fordist family wage might produce, Cooper reminds us that neoliberalism will find a way to capitalize upon it because "there is no form of social liberation, it would seem, that the neoliberal economist cannot incorporate within a new market for contractual services or high-risk credit" (8). Whatever we choose to call the globally insinuated economic and political systems indexed by the designation "neoliberal," versions of normal family life have undoubtedly been considered by neoliberal politicians and policy makers as a fundamentally economic set of relationships, as Cooper argues, in order to justify American neoliberal and neoconservative efforts to roll back the welfare state, especially during the 1980s and the culture wars of the 1990s.[13]

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[12] Neoliberalism, as a term, has gathered quite a bit of baggage. While I am sympathetic to claims that it is, as a descriptor of a single political project, too diverse and internally incoherent to designate any particular movements or trajectories, I use the term here for its utility in simply designating the persistent seep of market-based economics into all fields of public and political life. My thinking on the contours of the term has been guided largely by Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2004), Lisa Duggan's *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2004), David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), Wendy Brown's work in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (2009) and *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015), and especially Melinda Cooper's recent book *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (2017). For an example of a neoliberal "accounting" of the family, see Gary Becker's *A Treatise on the Family* (1980), in which Becker mathematically formalizes familial roles, functions, and relationships into equations.

[13] Cooper comments on the success of neoliberalism in pervading American politics and economics by conjecturing that "If Milton Friedman went on to become more of a public intellectual than a political insider, and if neoliberalism itself later lost the clearly identifiable profile it once enjoyed in the 1970s, it was because it had become so widely accepted among policy makers of all political stripes and so thoroughly disseminated throughout mainstream economics" (19).

Personal Responsibility and the Counter-Domestic

An exemplary act of neoliberal legislation, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 sounds a historical echo of Gary Becker's claim about the bedrock importance of family when it remarks that "[m]arriage is the foundation of a successful society." A deep-seated belief that marriage and the two-parent, heterosexual household promote the fetishized notion of personal responsibility, a key phrase for neoliberals and neoconservatives alike, pushed this legislation all the way to President Bill Clinton's desk.[14] When Clinton signed this legislation, he fulfilled his campaign promise to "change welfare as we know it." As a Democratic president, Clinton essentially fulfilled Nixon's frustrated goal of repealing cash welfare in the form of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The PRWORA diminished cash welfare by replacing AFDC with the trimmed down Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Shifting welfare resources away from cash welfare, the bill named the promotion of two-parent families as the key criterion for funding welfare programs. Intentionally or not, this bill continues to promote the formation of families while not necessarily providing relief for the needy families welfare should be serving.[15] The PRWORA allowed states to fund programs and funnel welfare recipients into extra-familial groups, from marriage counseling classes, to substance abuse treatment facilities and twelve-step programs, to

[14] Lisa Duggan has pointed out that the PRWORA's neoliberal logic "promotes the privatization of the costs of social reproduction, along with the care of human dependency needs, through personal responsibility exercised in family and in civic society—thus shifting the cost from state agencies to individuals and households" (15 *Twilight*, emphasis in original).

[15] For a detailed and engaging narrative account of the history of The PRWORA and the kinds of programs it ultimately funded, consult the 2016 podcast series produced by American Public Media's Marketplace, *The Uncertain Hour*, which, in light of the PRWORA's twentieth anniversary in September of 2016, specifically examines a number of the unlikely programs funded by block grants to the states and justified by the PRWORA's logic to produce and sustain two-parent households.

adult literacy and job preparedness classes that would theoretically supplement and stabilize the idealized two-parent and often necessarily dual-income family model.

Of course, the idealized, self-sustaining independence of the American family ignores much of American history and has always been a myth, and Stephanie Coontz observes as much when she reminds us that "early American families were dependent on a large network of neighbors, church institutions, courts, government officials, and legislative bodies for their sustenance" (70).[16] The true history of the American family notwithstanding, the political power and momentum of the two-parent family and the personal responsibility it purportedly teaches propelled The PRWORA into law. Ironically, the bill potentially invigorates modes of life, "affectional communities," "mutual inclinations," and other scenes of supplemental domestic care at odds, I will argue, with the kind of privatized subject discipline and individualized personal responsibility the two-parent family is supposed to produce.

While the programs and groups that The PRWORA utilizes to supplement the formation of two-parent families are the products of a the top-down, prescriptive legislative act, they also resemble grassroots ways of organizing sets of unwieldy and precarious bodies towards the concept Michael Warner has named as "counterpublic" that "maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status" (56). Warner explains that a counterpublic, "against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority

[16] Both Coontz's The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap (1992) and Elaine Tyler May's Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold-War Era (1990) provide detailed accounts of how the nuclear family model becomes naturalized and, ostensibly, a politically idealized myth.

and can have a critical relation to power" (56).[17] Bearing Warner's notion of the counterpublic in mind, might we begin to see the PRWORA as inadvertently acknowledging the need for alternatives to the two-parent family it is trying so desperately to prop up? Rather than thinking about the semi-public spaces and communities that spring up in service to the family as counterpublics, what happens when we think of them as counter-domestic "homeplaces" where marginalized bodies are re-humanized, to borrow a phrase from bell hooks, and cared for in essential ways?[18] By claiming the supplemental semi-private communities highlighted and potentially invigorated by The PRWORA as counter-domestic, I am relying on Foucault's notion of counter-conduct (rather than his notion of counter-history) as descriptive of communities that are "clearly not absolutely external" to the state but are instead its "border elements" (*Security, Territory, Population* 214–15). For Foucault, counter-conduct is produced by the state and is intimately tied to the "history of the raison d'État" in a dialectical relationship (357). Following this relationship, I find that what appears as counter-domestic in The PRWORA does not arise in direct opposition to normal, authorized domestic practice (i.e., not as anti-domestic); instead, the counter-domestic arises from within the strained logic and relationships found already within the nuclear family and its instrumentalization by the state as a means of privatizing reproduction and care. The counter-domestic arises from within the existing tensions and edges of more obviously recognizable domestic scenes.

[17] I'm pushing Warner's conception of the counter-public here a bit beyond the sexual and gendered limits he sets for it when he claims that the counter-public can "make possible new forms of gendered and sexual citizenship—meaning active participation in collective world making through publics of sex and gender" (57).

[18] For a detailed theory of how the "Homeplaces" were created "against all odds" by black women for the dehumanization of black American bodies, see bell hooks's "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance" (1990). See also n. 6 of this chapter.

Counter-Domestic Fiction

In the decades leading up to and following Clinton's signing of The PRWORA, American fiction produced a number of novels that sought to explore the more occult corners of domesticity, where the family tangled with an increasingly corporate America, and where both the family and the state failed to provide care to their constituent bodies. Widely read novels like Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1987), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), James Fogle's *Drugstore Cowboy* (1990), Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Sapphire's *Push* (1996), and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), to name just a few of the most recognizable, begin to contour stranger versions of domesticity and care that appear when the family begins to fail.[19] These novels hint that the groups, institutions and communities springing up around and in service to the family influence subjects in ways more essential than the nuclear family life they prop up.

In the chapters that follow, I will trace this strain of contemporary American fiction emerging in the period between Richard Nixon's failed 1969 attempt at welfare reform to the aftermath of Bill Clinton's 1996 signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Methodologically, there are no real surprises: I will read the novels of the historical period alongside legislative and political documents of the

[19] While I am relying on U.S. legislation here to frame the counter-domestic in American fiction in a particular moment in the 1990s, it is a genre that operates beyond these texts and across national borders. A brief list of other authors and texts of interest here: William Gaddis, *J R* (1975); Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love* (1987); Douglass Coupland, *Generation X* (1991); Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992); Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1992); Patrick MacCabe, *Butcher Boy* (1994); Sapphire, *Push* (1996); Helen DeWitt, *The Last Samurai* (2000); John King, *The Football Factory Trilogy* (2000) and *Human Punk* (2000); Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000); Michael Cunningham, *Specimen Days* (2005), and Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2007). All of these texts, in various ways, employ the novel to challenge the notions of normative domesticity that Armstrong argues are authored by the domestic novel.

moment—from the Moynihan Report, to The PRWORA, to Hillary Clinton's It Takes A Village—to illuminate how fiction highlights our need to reimagine modes of domesticity and care that constitute distinct versions of the good life. In an era of political obsession with the nuclear family and the perceived crises that confronted the family, counter-domestic fiction attempts to reveal alternative familial formations to the two-parent family of the Fordist era, so often featured and problematized in much of the most popular domestic fiction. Although the dissident modes of affiliation narrated by the works I explore appear bound to political attempts to supplement the Fordist political ideal of the family, I argue that counter-domestic fiction actually undermines the ideological emphasis on personal agency and responsibility that the nuclear family is supposed to produce, substituting collectivities that celebrate profligacy, class-consciousness, interdependence, and a rejection of capitalist ideologies that, ironically, enabled the formation of these counter-domestic spaces in the first place.

Beyond merely deconstructing the nuclear family model and the social and economic systems resting upon it, however, the counter-domestic novel offers a new horizon of seemingly perverse possibilities for domesticity that appears out of state efforts to reinforce and supplement the formation of two-parent families. While the unlikely "domestic" sites of the counter-domestic novel appear out of late-capitalism's mania for privatization and deregulation, ranging from the rag-tag corporate structure cobbled together by a misguidedly enterprising eleven-year old in William Gaddis's *J R*, to the adult literacy classes and the addiction and terminal illness support groups of Sapphire's *Push* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. These sites threaten to produce unwieldy subjects

who do not neatly signify within the parameters of contemporary political discourse. I read the collectivities and counterpublics of these novels through the lens of the domestic because the modes of life and ways of being together represented by these fictions are produced, as I've argued above, by neoliberal capital's attempts to sustain and instrumentalize the nuclear family and the hidden labor it performs. By reading these novels as an iteration of the domestic genre, I can usefully put the modes of life represented in counter-domestic fiction in a dialectical relationship with the domestic fiction that Armstrong has so compellingly suggested normalized and regulated the daily work of intimate affiliation and bodily care. I find these counter-domestic formations to be responsive permutations of the domestic itself.

I think it's important, before I go any further, do say a brief word about what the counter-domestic is not. Same-sex marriage, shifting and loosening gender roles, and the normalization of divorce appear as rather obvious shifts in American domesticity of the past few decades, but the relationship these developments have to American domesticity is not "counter" in the way I've defined it above. In short, the American family has shown itself to be elastic enough to accommodate the challenges to who belongs in the two-parent family while still maintaining the essential structure. One need look no further than the sitcom Modern Family to see the two-parent family patting itself on the back for recapturing, with little to no trouble, the divorced and homosexual bodies once deemed a threat to its very existence. Judith Butler, among others, has pointed out how gay marriage

sustains rather than challenges the two-parent monogamous household and the heteronormative, patriarchal regimes it subtends.[20]

Given the surge in popular representations of American families ability to accommodate a broader spectrum of minority bodies and sexualities, recent literary criticism has attempted to track and account for shifts in domesticity in American fiction with regard to shifting gender roles and divorce. In *Neodomestic American Fiction* (2010), Kristin J. Jacobson poses questions about how representations of American domesticity have necessarily become more capacious. She insists on the term "neodomestic fiction" to categorize work that "advances a politics of domestic instability, particularly emphasized through its distinctive spaces and conclusions" (3). Ultimately, however, the destabilizing energy of neodomestic spaces ultimately and unsurprisingly stabilizes, assimilates, and, indeed, domesticates the bodies that sought to destabilize it in the first place. Jacobson explains that "the key to understanding neodomestic fiction and its radical project of recycling and reinventing American domesticity is to recognize such seemingly separate 'foreign' entities—like masculine and queer domesticities— as members of the family" (14). Along similar lines, Scandinavian scholar Helena Wahlström has looked to both literature and film to explored representations of "new fatherhood" in her recent book, *New Fathers?: Contemporary American Stories of Masculinity, Domesticity and Kinship* (2010), in order to examine the complex ways that the role of "father" has been revised against the nuclear tradition that seems to dominant. Regarding divorce, Desmond F. McCarthy's *Reconstructing the Family in Contemporary American Fiction* (1998) examines

[20] See Butler's "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" (2002).

the dystopian and utopian ways that contemporary novels reconstruct the family in the face of divorce and decline of the nuclear model. By claiming the novels I will read in the coming chapters as counter-domestic fictions, I am aiming to read the American family and American domesticity beyond the perceived challenges of shifting gender roles and the perceived decline of the family. I locate domesticity and the labor of subject production and care in the spaces that exceed and supplement the family and the household.

Notes on Method: Surfaces, Futures, Strange Intimacies and Stranger Care

Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* serves as a crucial model for the way I read novels in this dissertation as both historical documents and cultural agents. Armstrong's work guides certain conclusions I've drawn about the shifts in domesticity that counter-domestic novels expose and animate. The close readings I offer in the coming chapters have also been influenced by recent debates about "the way we read now," to recall the introduction to Sharon Marcus's and Steven Best's co-edited 2009 edition of *Representations*, which examined various emerging interpretative practices that fit under the rubric of "surface reading."[21] While I'm in no hurry to abandon the symptomatic reading that pervades the field and continues to produce useful insights, I attempt to read these texts with an eye towards the kinds of strategies and communities they offer on their

[21] A brief bibliography of the "reading wars" texts I've found particularly useful: Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" (1966), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay's about You" (2002), Rita Felski's "Context Stinks!" (2009), and Timothy Bewes's "Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism" (2010).

surfaces.[22] I ask these texts what alternatives reveal to normalized domestic life as much as I probe them to see the anxieties and absent historical causes they conceal.

Not surprisingly, reading these texts with my eyes open to the alternative modes of life, care and companionship they speculate about have led me to queer theory's insights about how "zones of aberrance and noise" can be simultaneously emancipatory and restrictive, productive and prohibitive, and, indeed, utopic and terrifying. Thinkers like Lauren Berlant, Lee Edelman, and José Esteban Muñoz have provided indispensable models for looking unflinchingly—or as unflinchingly as one can—at what contemporary versions of "the good life" portend for our political future. Berlant, Edelman, Muñoz, Butler, D'Emilio, Warner, Ann Cvetkovich, Elizabeth Freeman, Elizabeth Povinelli, and Jasbir Puar, among others who will be discussed in the coming pages, have also helped me understand and articulate how family and kinship operate as an evolving set of relationships that both enable and police emergent queer modes of life and affiliation. If domestic fiction can normalize domestic life and the gendered political roles it orders, then queer readings of domestic fiction, or representations of queer domesticities, can potentially reveal much about alternative trajectories for domestic spaces, familial relations, and the bodies they bind together.

Queer theory also offers inspiring ways of projecting possibility from beyond the politically supplemented and sanctioned spaces of normal family life. Muñoz sees these margins of difference and non-belonging as utopian staging grounds. In *Cruising Utopia*,

[22] Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1982) appears the fulcrum against which surface reading attempts to leverage itself. Though they are not often credited as such, Marcus and Best are careful to avoid appearing to offer a polemic against the pervasive symptomatic reading practices that Jameson's watershed book ushered in. See "Surface Reading: An Introduction," pages 2-6.

Muñoz argues that the constitutive "we" in the 1971 manifesto of a group called Third World Gay Revolution becomes "the field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to belonging in collectivity" (20). Muñoz's is careful to note that "[t]his 'we' does not speak to a merely identitarian logic but instead to a logic of futurity. The 'we' speaks to a 'we' that is 'not yet conscious,' the future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment. The 'we' is not content to describe who the collective is but more nearly describes what the collective and the larger social order could be, what it should be" (20). In this passage, Muñoz effectively articulates what I believe to be the project of counter-domestic fiction: to imagine belonging for those who cannot belong and to project into the future both private and political modes of affiliation, affinity, and care for these bodies.

While Muñoz has helped me order my thoughts about how to understand the counter-domestic's temporal situation, Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy* has helped me see where the counter-domestic can exceed the intimate logic of more properly normative domesticities. Dean, who brilliantly constructs an ethics around practices of cruising and unprotected anal sex in the age of HIV/AIDS, idealizes "the intimate encounter with the other that does not attempt to eliminate otherness," even as many of Dean's informants rely on the terms of the familial to describe their encounters and relations (180). While the family inherently familiarizes bodies to each other through the care and belonging it is supposed to provide, the counter-domesticity I find in novels like Gaddis's *J R*, Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, James Fogle's *Drugstore Cowboy*, Sapphire's *Push*, and Helen DeWitt's *The Last Samurai* allows for care, affiliation, and humanization to be

administered without all the entanglements of obligation and expectation of the family. The stranger care— care administered in strange ways and by strangers—discloses different sets of trajectories and possibilities for the future that Muñoz helps us grasp. And, of course, Dean reminds us that "One cannot cruise at home, only in places where one is a stranger" (184).

Chapter Descriptions

The first chapter offers a reading of William Gaddis's 1975 novel *J R*, which appeared in the wake of Nixon's failed 1969 attempt to reform welfare and his 1972 veto the Comprehensive Child Care Act. I argue that J R represents one of high-literary culture's early attempts to name the problems that an emergent corporate capitalism poses for the formation of subjects within families by literalizing corporate phrases like "a family of companies." In the wake of Nixon's attempts to rigidify political commitments to "personal responsibility" and individualism, Gaddis presents the corporate culture that exemplifies these commitments as a disastrous alternative for the care of precarious bodies—in the novel's case, an eleven year-old boy whose mom "works all the time." By reading the eleven-year old J R's ludicrous attempts to build a "family of companies" as a literal attempt to replace his non-existent family life, I show that Gaddis's satire tries to see through to its calamitous end the emergent neoliberal belief that market-based reforms in education and childcare can adequately address domestic strife and poverty. After highlighting the ways *J R* follows emergent neoliberal logic to its logical ends, I argue that Gaddis's famously difficult novel, which appears as over seven-hundred pages of unmarked dialogue, attempts to teach us to care and attend differently to the precarious

bodies it narrates. This bewildering form mimics while it undermines, I argue, the emergent corporate culture of the 1970s that obscures suffering beneath celebrated notions of investment, privatization, and financial abstraction.

In the second chapter, I focus on 1996 as the moment that Nixon's attempt to reform welfare is realized, when Bill Clinton signs the PRWORA. Against the PRWORA's claims that "personal responsibility" is the product of the healthy family, and that a healthy family is the foundation of "successful society," I highlight a number of texts that appear between 1990 and 1996—James Fogle's *Drugstore Cowboy*, Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*—to offer earnest yet absurd visions of how practices of care and affiliation exceeding the nuclear family model appear precisely when precarious bodies are suspended among notions of responsibility, independence, and the subsidized therapeutic frameworks that the PRWORA attempts to supply. By reading settings like twelve-step programs (*Jesus' Son*), terminal and chronic illness support groups (*Fight Club*), and even prisons and psychiatric institutions (*Drugstore Cowboy and Fight Club*) as accidental iterations of domesticity, I argue that while these novels seem to be sympathetic to neoliberal attempts to recuperate the nuclear family and the personal responsibility it purportedly creates, they find alternatives to it from within the therapeutic frameworks of support and recovery groups and job training programs.

In the third chapter, I continue to think through the communities and outcomes that the PRWORA accidentally seems to invigorate. While the second chapter highlights, in a sense, how attempts to inculcate "personal responsibility" fail, this chapter examines moments when personal responsibility appears in ways that exceed the logic of

capitalism. By highlighting first the ways that the PRWORA's job training and literacy programs create a cheap and exploitable class of worker, I argue that Sapphire's *Push*, and the community that appears out of the adult literacy class that it narrates, show the ability of continuing education classes to produce personal responsibility with wildly unexpected outcomes. I argue that Sapphire's novel (and the subsequent film adaptation) should be considered "workfare fictions" because of the ways the characters involved learn to tell their stories for purposes that exceed the goals of job training and professionalization. The result of these "workfare" programs in the novel is not a pliant and obedient worker but instead a subject with burgeoning class consciousness. I then look to Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* to illustrate the surprising ways that Bone's journey to develop her ingenuity and her voice in order to narrate her own precarious life creates affiliations, bonds, and practices of care that rely more on class and sexual identity than they do on established and failing systems of kinship. Both these novels offer accounts of the ways that characters failed by both their families and the state have to learn to rewrite their accounts of intimacy and futurity under rubrics that exceed both traditional family values and state-sponsored attempts to produce productive, responsible individuals.

In the final chapter I grapple with what the aftermath of having a law like the PRWORA on the books is. To do this, I offer a reading of Helen DeWitt's *The Last Samurai*, a novel in which an exceptional child named Ludo, inspired by the recruitment scenes in Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai*, attempts to choose an appropriate father after his mother, Sybilla (a lapsed Oxford classicist barely supporting herself with a job digitizing archives), refuses to divulge the identity of a biological father she deems

objectionable. DeWitt's novel forces a confrontation with inadequate yet dominant notions of family, and it ironically asks that we reexamine possibilities for familial care by embracing the neoliberal obsessions of choice, responsibility, and privatization towards ends not compatible with market-capitalism. I show that the way DeWitt's novel radically repurposes public archives and public space, from Sibylla's use of a blockbuster video to provide Ludo with at least seven adequate father figures (*The Seven Samurai*) to the ways Ludo and Sibylla use the London Tube as a source of cheap heat and childcare. By making both archival material and public space do the private, familial things we don't expect them to do, DeWitt's novel asks us to consider that transformative ideas about care and family already exist within the capacious and conflicting logic of late-twentieth century daily life. These hidden modes of care and affiliation exist within neoliberalism, yet they threaten to produce futures incoherent with neoliberalism's market-based logic.

Papa was a Rodeo

Before I plunge into what I believe to be the proper literature of the contemporary counter-domestic, I'd like to spend a bit of time with a seemingly silly song from The Magnetic Fields 1999 concept album *69 Love Songs*. The album's songs, all written by The Magnetic Fields's frontman and founding member Stephin Merritt, take turns variously celebrating and impugning narratives of love and romantic entanglement, all with the well-cultivated irony that defines 1990's indie rock. Well into the album's second disc, on the track titled "Papa Was a Rodeo," Merritt's nearly affectless baritone delivers this chorus:

Papa was a rodeo, mama was a rock'n'roll band

I could play guitar and rope a steer before I learned to stand

Home was anywhere with diesel gas, love was a trucker's hand

Never stuck around long enough for a one-night stand

Before you kiss me you should know, papa was a rodeo

I want to suspend, for a moment, the obvious absurdity at work in this song in order to unpack the insight that this absurdity conceals. Alongside the song's winking jokes at the sentimentality of love and love songs, the lyrics point out that American capitalism has generated spaces and groups where subjects are conditioned and propelled towards ends that are not necessarily capitalism's own. The intimacies and erotics of this bizarrely imagined familial landscape become fleeting and fragmented. Love is rendered synecdochally as merely a "trucker's hand," while the claim that the singer "never stuck around long enough for a one night stand" suggests that a more meaningfully productive or reproductive meeting is entirely out of the question. Any possibility of intimacy, love, and reproduction are foreclosed by the singer's rendition of his history and his commitments.

Suggesting that rodeos and rock and roll present any impediment to capitalism's ability to reproduce itself is obviously ridiculous, but this silly little song presents, in the end, a rather moving argument for the utility and the futurity of counter-domestic spaces. The warnings and the prohibitions of the chorus ("Before you kiss me you should know") are shown to have been ignored as the song's narrative progresses into the third verse when Merritt sings

And now it's fifty-five years later

We've had the romance of the century

After all these years wrestling gators

I still feel like crying when I think of what you said to me

Following this verse, the song springs a bit of a surprise on the listener when band member Shirley Simms takes Merritt's place, singing the chorus before being joined by Merritt for the final "before you kiss me you should know." There is a certain endearing quality to the addition of Simms higher-pitched, twangy voice in the song's final moments, as the song realizes, literally, the presence of the strange intimate community it suggests. The song devolves into the twee joke we had to suspect it always was when Merritt nearly breaks free from his affectlessness to proclaim with slight ebullience: "What a coincidence, your papa was a rodeo." Simms come back on the literal final note to punctuate this closing phrase with Merritt as they sing, together, "Too." While the song seems to attempt to undermine its own sentiment and sentimentalism with each mounting absurdity, the sweet pleasure and beauty of the Merritt's and Simms's voices finding each other by the song's close to affirm for each other their "romance of the century," resembles my own desire to find something unlikely enduring and even potentially emancipatory and reparative in the grassroots communities that appear in the interstices of American capitalism. The strange affinities and stranger care that appear in this song are exemplary of the kinds of counter-domesticities that appear in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER 1

Corporations are Families, Too: Corporate Care and the Beginning of the End of Welfare as We Knew it in William Gaddis's *J R*

In a brief introduction to William Gaddis's "J R Up to Date," Joseph Tabbi draws attention to an illuminating mistake. Tabbi notes that a shortened version "J R Up to Date" published in *The New York Times Book Review* in October, 1987 ("Trickle Up Economics: J R Goes to Washington") was "accompanied by the picture of a young cowboy— the illustrator having evidently associated the name with J. R. Ewing of *Dallas*, perhaps the most popular TV show in America at the time" (Rush 63). The accidental conflation by the *Times*'s illustrator of Gaddis's J R Vansant, the eleven-year old title character of the 1975 novel who somehow managed to start a Wall Street empire from the telephone booth outside his junior high school, with an aging, cowboy hat-wearing businessman portrayed on television by Larry Hagman couldn't have been plotted better by Gaddis himself, a master of the absurd yet revealing coincidence. Perhaps understanding some of the confusion that might stem from the similarities between the two J Rs, Gaddis offered this brief expository note to the *Times*'s Readers:

> The original 'J R' burst on the scene in a novel in 1975, an unkempt 11 year old whose penny stock and defaulted bond operations blossomed into a vast and

> perilous financial empire through his simple creed of 'get all you can ' by obeying the letter of the law and evading its spirit at every turn. (*Rush* 62)[1]

The specifics of J R's character, ironically, fall quite short of the constructed image of the no-nonsense cowboy he gets mistaken for by the *Times*: J R is a fatherless boy, ill-mannered, unkempt, and impoverished, though he is self-made. While the illustration in the *Times* gets the details of the novel character wrong (J R is certainly no cowboy), the cartoon cowboy does capture the "spirit" of Gaddis's strange title character, who does, after all, obsess over cultivating a strong paternalistic image for himself as the head of his global "family of companies."[2]

In the chapter that follows, I want to consider this easy and fitting conflation between Gaddis's eleven-year old title character and an unscrupulous old Texas oilman as a way of understanding *J R* as a novel that inaugurates a shift in the ways American fiction represents late capitalism – specifically, changes to American domesticity, familial care, and the kind of subjects produced by emergent practices of care in excess of the two-parent nuclear family model. The eleven-year old J R's unlikely rise on Wall Street (J R turned his junior high school class's single share of Diamond Cable stock into a precarious financial empire) obscures the novel's more interesting themes of domesticity and family, but in spite of this, the novel shrewdly reimagines ways of routing bodies through an unlikely network of domestic spaces created by, but not necessarily identifiable with, the rise of global capitalism and finance in New York City. In *J R*'s 726 pages, the title

[1] The television program, *Dallas*, starring Larry Hagman as J.R., premiered in 1978, thus Gaddis's insistence on "the original" for his own fictional creation.
[2] See pages 650-51in *J R* for J R's consultation with a public relations firm to create a virile, masculine image.

character appears in his family home exactly zero times. Instead, J R attempts to recreate or reimagine his home life into the sphere of corporate capitalism, spending most of the time we see him engaged in managing his "family of companies," to quote an oft-repeated phrase from the novel, on the phone (in a phone booth) or in his corporation's ersatz headquarters located in an absurdly cluttered "Ninety-sixth Street apartment" variously occupied by the struggling writers, William Gibbs and Thomas Eigen, and, later, the struggling young composer, Edward Bast. The apartment accidentally serves as a kind of alternative (and disastrous) domestic space for all of these characters, and Bast and Gibbs, who are also both teachers at J R's school (music and physics, respectively), are pressed into service to care for J R's corporation, rather than for the eleven-year old J R himself. Eigen, the most successful writer of the bunch, manages, somewhat, to escape J R's grasp, because he is dealing with the breakup of his own nuclear family. While Gaddis's novel attempts to reimagine what a more diffuse domesticity looks like during the tumultuous 1970s, with the declines the of the Fordist family wage and the welfare state, the novel doesn't often seem to know how to mobilize or even imagine new social and political efficacies for the bodies that assemble within these networks, which is potentially Gaddis's point.[3] Instead, *J R* narrates these networks' inherent vulnerabilities to the broader economic systems with which they are imbricated while gesturing toward the unwieldy possibilities of affiliation and care that necessarily emerge when the family recedes. By

[3] For useful theorizations of what the 1970s meant for so-called neoliberal economics and politics, see Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2004) and Melinda Cooper's comprehensive study of American neoliberalism's relationship to family policy *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (2017). Cooper's text offers a detailed narrative of the decline of the Fordist family wage and its effects on American social and family policy. For both Foucault and Cooper, the work of economist Gary Becker is especially emblematic of the neoliberal movement in American economics, especially his *Treatise on the Family* (1981).

tracking the relationships between vulnerable domestic spaces and the increasingly invasive corporate world, Gaddis's novel reveals the pernicious effects of the market-born strategies that spring up to supplement the alarming paucity of familial care and unconditional love, notions continually invoked by the title of a perpetually unfinished manuscript, Agapē Agape, written by Gibbs.[4]

Gibbs and Edward Bast, the young composer whom J R entangles into service in the J R Corporation, I will argue, are key figures who practice unlikely acts of care and labor that we might begin to see as replacing more recognizable but absent acts of domestic or familial care. Bast's and Gibbs's acts of care are counterweights to J R's attempts to fashion himself a new family out of the organizational and ethical structures he finds at hand in the corporate world of New York City in the 1970s. Unlike J R, whose most absurd actions can always be traced back to Gaddis's phrase, "get all you can," Bast and Gibbs stand as figures who can "act" and "mediate" between domestic networks and economic "events" in always "surprising" and "under-determined" ways, to borrow some usefully descriptive terms from Bruno Latour (45).[5] These actions occurring beyond the narrowly habituated and economically inflected familial relations that appear as normal everyday life disclose opportunities to reconceive of community and care beyond

[4] Gaddis's own manuscript titled *Agapē Agape* was published posthumously in 2007. Like Gibbs's unfinished work, Gaddis's book is a treatise on the player piano and mechanization in the arts.
[5] Latour's reason for insisting on surprise—on beginning with surprise to "reassemble the social" instead of more established notions of "'determination of action by society,' the 'calculative abilities of individuals', or the 'power of the unconscious"—is that it is important to maintain "the under-determination of action, from the uncertainties and controversies about who and what is acting when 'we' act (45).

economic rationality's ascent to common sense, which Foucault names, via neoliberal economist Gary Becker, as a hallmark of neoliberalism.[6]

"Work, work… throw 'em off the roles": Cowboy Nixon, Welfare Reform, and J R as Neoliberal Subject

Bast and Gibbs interest me because they appear so ill-at-ease in a world where nearly every aspect of daily life is inflected by economic rationality and competition; J R, on the other hand, appears perfectly at home in Gaddis's fully corporatized dystopia. Gaddis's novel literalizes the notion of "a family of companies," and it holds J R up as the ideal (even blamelessly innocent) subject produced and disciplined by the neoliberal triumph of economic rationality. We can perhaps infer that J R appears so uncouth in part because his mother isn't around, since she has to work "these funny hours" (*J R* 172). J R's situation as the apparently neglected son of a single mother seems to forecast the growing unfounded (and fundamentally racist) national fear, noted by Melinda Cooper, that "the long-standing, quasi-mythical crisis of the African America family… had now spread to the white middle-class" (7).

Yet by 1987, Gaddis, who curiously admits to *The Paris Review* of being "awfully fond of that boy," imagines his character quite at home with the cultivated Washington personae of masculine ranchers and irascible oilmen who continuously populate Washington following the Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon presidencies.[7] Beyond

[6] For more on Becker and economics as common sense, see Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*, page 235.
[7] Connecting the American "cowboy social policy" to its domestic and foreign causes and effects, Eileen Boris notes that while Richard Nixon attempted to project something like cowboy masculinity, "Nixon himself was no cowboy—unlike Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon Baines Johnson, and Ronald Reagan—he didn't ride horses and his claim to real masculinity always remained suspect. After all, he was the vice presidential candidate who cried during the 1956 Checkers Speech when pleading to retain his slot on the

serving as a potentially embarrassing reminder that *J R* quickly shrank from the literary spotlight after winning the National Book Award in 1976, the image of the cowboy, however accidental, ends up serving as a useful symbol to aid in decoding what Gaddis's monstrously long, formally inventive (or "difficult") novel, written almost entirely in unmarked fragments of dialogue, tries to tell us about American life during a decade of political and economic upheaval.[8] The idealized, masculine image of the cowboy as a hard-working, self-reliant, and personally responsible figure illuminates some of the stark ideological contrasts that have shaped the political and policy debates in the decades since the novel's publication, especially with respect to welfare, family policy, and the rise of "work," "workfare," and "personal responsibility" as dominant political ideals.[9] The 1970s saw major shifts in American life as the corporatization of politics hollowed out what remained of the New Deal/Great Society welfare state that was built upon Keynesian economic principles. Eileen Boris helpfully points out that the cowboy appears as a mythical foil to the equally mythical and racialized figure of the welfare queen,

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ticket even though he took inappropriate campaign contributions. But Nixon captured the spirit of the cowboy in tying domestic as well as foreign policy to the quest for independence" (601).

[8] As a subject of literary concern and criticism, Gaddis's work has found a persistent following. In the decade after Gaddis's death in 1998 some renewed interest in his work has sprung up around a debate about so-called "difficult" fiction. In a 2002 *New Yorker* piece titled "Mr. Difficult," Jonathan Franzen calls *J R* an "Ultimate breach of contract" between reader and writer—"a fruitcake" that Gaddis himself would not deign to consume (263). In a 2005 response in *Harper's*, Ben Marcus comes to Gaddis's defense by troubling Franzen's idea of supposedly "difficult" fiction with the assertion that Gaddis is decidedly not willing "to sell short the aims of literature, to serve as its fuming, unwanted ambassador, to apologize for its excesses or near-misses, its blind alleys, to assault the reading public with film-ready versions of reality and experience and inner sensations, scenes flying jauntily by under the banner of realism" (52). In 2003, on the heels of Franzen's "Mr. Difficult" (2002), the literary journal *Conjunctions* published a number of pieces in supportive of Gaddis, including a paean to *J R* by Don DeLillo wherein he claims, contra Franzen, that "*J R* in fact is a realistic novel—so unforgivingly real that we may fail to recognize it as such. It is the real world of its own terms, without the perceptual scrim that we tend to erect (novelists and others) in order to live and work safely within it" (391).

[9] For accounts and critiques of the rise of "workfare" and "personal responsibility," see Jamie Peck's *Workfare States* (2001) and Lisa Duggan's *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and an Attack on Democracy* (2004).

contending that "Behind the image of the cowboy stands the workings of empire; behind the portrait of the welfare queen lies the punishment of poor women, often African American or Latina, for their motherhood, sexuality, and lack of dependence on husbands" (602). She goes on to suggest that the constructed image of the cowboy has been appropriated and deployed to various effect by United State presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson, Nixon (who did it poorly), Reagan, and George W. Bush.[10]

Unsurprisingly, welfare dependency is treated with distain by a number of the ultra-masculine businessman in J R; meanwhile, the numerous corporations and businesses in the novel celebrate their ability to get their hands on government subsidies, grants, and tax credits.[11] J R, following his corporation's acquisition of a chain of funeral homes, has crassly proposed to the family-owned chain's previous owner the following strategy of both dehumanizing welfare recipients and "making them pay":

> he's concerned about unprofitable plots of course burying the welfare poor has always been a losing proposition simply noblesse oblige the agencies pay such a

[10] Boris notes that both the ideal masculine, white cowboy the black welfare queen she sees as the cowboy's symbolic opposite are fictions. Boris writes: "Actual cowboys, those who herded cattle on the ranching frontier, composed a multi-cultural workforce, whose position as wage-earners dependent on their employers hardly appears salient in the national imagery, never mind media representations. Until recently, the majority of women on welfare were white ; most of these poor single mothers spent less than two years receiving public aid before returning to employment" (602).

[11] Giving the lie to notions that welfare state benefits most directly only the poor, Elaine Tyler May notes that "By stimulating these particular kinds of [planned] suburban housing developments and providing subsidies to homeowners, the federal government effectively underwrote the baby boom, along with the lifestyle and community arrangements that fostered traditional gender roles in the home" (163). Bruce Robbins suggests that the welfare state is worth (the embarrassment of) defending and resuscitating because of its widely distributed benefits and the participation it engenders, even in its imperfect implementation. He writes: "it is a cross-class project, the historical result of popular demands for protection combined with the rising influence of technocratic expertise. Thus it is the closest thing we have had to an ideological synthesis, a defensible common program in which the glaringly different interests of the poor and needy, on the one hand, and elite experts, on the other, can even appear to be resolved" (10).

> pittance but his proposal to make it pay by placing them six and eight deep to a plot when he was describing the entire package idea on the telephone as vertical integration Mother was simply aghast she thought he meant darkies and whites stacked in layers like a giant Dubos torta don't you just crave one right now? (547)

Beyond the racism of likening dead bodies to pastry, demonizing welfare recipients, and attaching noble virtues to a callous and laughably stupid business class (forgivable in J R because he is eleven), this passage distills the way that both corporate language (the absurd misunderstandings about "vertical integration" by and the dominance of economic rationality ("make it pay") warp notions of ethics and "personal responsibility" when loosed on a social landscape already rife with racial and economic inequality. In Gaddis's 1987 update, J R has seemingly grown into a plainspoken inelegance that might be mistaken for George W. Bush's or Donald Trump's comically obtuse malapropisms. In addition to using the word "nuculer," J R states, with masculine confidence, that "when many people are out of work, unemployment results" (*Rush* 68, 63).[12] In one instance, J R callously transmutes a statistical account that "40 percent of New York City's children live" below the poverty line into "these forty poor children in New York" (65). These errors suggest that while J R is able to internalize and mobilize the ideological principles of global capitalism, he is fundamentally and perpetually unable to connect the economic operations to the bodies they use, obscure, and ruin.

[12] Tim Conley makes the simultaneously hilarious and sobering suggestion that J R, whose public success "depends on unapologetic, monomaniacal avarice in the face of all challenges, obstacles, or inconveniences," is an eerie anticipation of George W. Bush's ascent to the White House "despite his trail of entrepreneurial disasters" (131).

Echoing the growing political distain for welfare in the 1970s and 1980s, J R bemoans the military providing not just healthcare to its veterans but also, absurdly, "free haircuts" (68). Gaddis's 1987 "update" of J R, connects the "get all you can" spirit, which Gaddis named as a major theme in the 1975 original, with political attempts during the 1980s to strip American social policy of its long-standing, if flawed, safety-net, for the benefit of the so-called military-industrial complex. J R "updated" offers the following testimony, complete with Gaddis's intentional spelling and arithmetic errors:

> See mainly these spending cuts we're proposing like one third of them come from these here low income programs which aren't hardly cost effective taxwise like this $1.5 billion for housing and all for these here elderly and handicapped and this energy assistance for all these here poor people, so for that money you get to buy this whole brand-new Marine anphibious assault ship […] in just one year you cut out all these old people are piling up on us? and these here Federal housing and farming income subsidies? […] Or you figure just in 1985 where we spend $75.9 billion on Medicare and this other $25 billion on Medicaid, these reforms we're proposing in these here programs should save like $90 billion this next five years. (Rush 67-68)

In both the 1987 update and the original novel, Gaddis's apparent satire reveals itself as a bitingly funny yet terrifyingly realistic representation of American political discourse. Compare J R's speech above, in which the poor, elderly, and infirm are "piling up on us," with Nixon's secretly taped private comments about welfare, in which he complains to John D. Erlichman about cash welfare for, in Nixon's words, "little Negro bastards" (qtd.

in Boris 609).[13] "Let people like Pat Moynihan," Nixon proclaimed, "believe in all that crap. But I don't believe in it. Total emphasis of everybody must be that this is much better than we had last year…. work, work, throw 'em off the rolls. That's the key" (609).

Moynihan authored the 1965 report "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action," which infamously suggested that the economic, social, and political difficulties facing black American families stemmed not just from the residual effects of slavery, but perhaps even more so from the persistence of matriarchal family structures and absentee fathers. Nixon's opposition to Moynihan's faith in the welfare state and the ability of the two-parent family structure to produce healthy, productive citizens, and his own insistence on "work," serve as a surprisingly useful rubric for evaluating what Gaddis's novel and his 1987 update suggest about how American literature might respond to shifts in American thinking about the economy, social policy, and domestic life. Moynihan's largely discredited diagnosis of the matriarchal structure of many black American families as "a tangle of pathology" represents what Melinda Cooper suggests is a dominant neoliberal and neoconservative consensus on the crisis for the American family, namely, the decline of the Fordist family wage and the social and political order built upon it;[14] Nixon's private comments, along with his 1969 attempt to do away with Aid to Families

[13] Nixon's racism is further illuminated in these tapes by his alarming comments including the following: " 'I have the greatest affection for them (blacks) but I know they're not going to make it for 500 years,' says Nixon. 'They aren't. You know it too. I asked Julie about the black studies program at Smith (College, which she attended)' " (qtd. in Warren).

[14] See the first chapter of Cooper's *Family Values* For an engaging ethnographic account of the connections between welfare, single-motherhood, and black American family life see Carol Stack's *All Our Kin* (1973). Stack's study provides important insights into the way that American welfare policies actually encourage non-nuclear familial structures by withholding essential benefits for women and children when a male "breadwinner" is present, regardless of the sufficiency of the male's wage to provide for a family. For more on the decline of Fordism in both the United States and in the United Kingdom, see David Harvey's *The Conditions of Post-Modernity* (1990).

with Dependent Children (AFDC) and his 1971 veto of the Comprehensive Child Care Act, on the other hand, seem to suggest that the President of the United States believed the family, along with the labor and ideological reproduction it provided, to be of secondary importance to the instructive and formative power of work. Of course, by 1996, when President Bill Clinton became the unlikely figure to finally do away with AFDC, Nixon's and Moynihan's positions had been reconciled in the sweeping welfare reform bill, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which simultaneously claims (it is still in effect at the time of this writing), that "Marriage is the foundation of a successful society" and that work requirements are integral to any successful welfare system.

I want to suggest that Gaddis's *J R* (both the novel and the character) might align more closely with Nixon's apparent dismissal of the two-parent family as panacea for socio-economic strife than with Moynihan's hand-wringing about the decline of the American family, though, to be sure, Gaddis's novel reaches some decidedly non-Nixonian conclusions about how "work" can produce and inform operative national ideologies. Nixon appears rather disinterested in the average American family's ability to weather economic strife brought on by the decline of the Fordist family. Gaddis's novel attempts to diagnose the problems caused and/or revealed by the rise of corporatism in American life and the near apotheosis of work as transcendent, transformative, and redemptive, but it also probes the emergent structures and interstices of corporate American capitalism for modes of affiliation and care-taking that exceed the seemingly imperiled two-parent family. *J R* looks deeply into what, for lack of a more coherent term,

we might call nascent American neoliberalism in order to speculate what ideologies, subjectivities, and modes of life and care might emerge from the challenges capitalism creates for the American family. In discussing fiction's ability to mold the imagination of the state, Gaddis claimed in a speech that "we've got no choice but to get on with it… to cling in our own fictions, in our own versions of the state, to what responsible intelligence, what individual life in the state that is to say, could and should be" (126). Evaluating *J R* as a fiction that attempts to "mold the imagination of the state" transforms the novel, at least in part, from a satirical documentation of Gaddis's regret over what capitalism has done to American into a speculation about what possibilities for affiliation, care, and even love arise from the Fordist family's collapse. If the novel serves, on the one hand, as a way for Gaddis to mourn a bygone era of what he saw as a more responsible, Keynesian capitalism, it also provides, on the other, a blank canvas on which Gaddis can imagine the emergence of perhaps more appealing modes of affiliation, labor, community, and care.

"Surgical Appliances for the Whole Family": Gaddis and the Epic Dysfunction of the American Family

Like economist Gary Becker's *Treatise on the Family*, in which he attempts to quantify the economic functions and value of individual roles within the family, *J R* begins with the questions about the economic function of family relationships. The novel's opening pages set the stage for, perhaps, the text's most coherent and accessible set of plot points: the ultimate fate of the Bast family business, General Roll Company, which began as a player piano roll producer. The novel opens on questions about the paternity of

Edward Bast, a young composer (though his actual age is never revealed) who may be the son (rather than the nephew) of General Roll's deceased founder, Thomas Bast.[15] Edward's potential inheritance, and the fate of the General Roll Company as a family-owned company, serves as one of the novel's sturdiest narrative strains: Stella (Thomas Bast's daughter and either Edward's cousin or half-sister) and her husband Norman Angel want to stop Edward from gaining control of General Roll; Edward also teaches music at J R's Massapequa school, which consequently entangles him in J R's chaotic foray into the stock market after J R's social studies class (taught by the heiress Amy Joubert) purchases one share of Diamond Cable stock (a company run by Amy's father, Monty Moncrieff). The novel simultaneously tracks the progress of the two young males, J R and Edward Bast, who are tasked with making it in the world (and its global, corporate economy) as their families dissolve. J R has no father to speak of, and his mother, a nurse, works all the time.[16] Bast (who is essentially bullied into a job as the face of J R's growing corporate empire) labors under the expectations that he, like his father (or, perhaps, uncle) James, might work as a professional composer. The Bast family, like its business, seems to be on the verge of collapse, so much so that at one point in the novel Edward literally cannot find his family home because it has been physically relocated (664).

Attempting to recalibrate critical discussion of *J R*, Ralph Clare has recently argued that "In its absorbing family drama, J R can be placed firmly in the tradition of novels

[15] Questions about Bast's "majority" are never truly resolved in the novel. Bast is clearly older than J R because he ends up serving as the public figurehead of J R's corporation, but his "majority" is never established.

[16] To its credit, *J R* doesn't seem particularly judgmental about J R's mother's decision to work rather than attend to her son (as though mothers in similar situations ever even have this choice), her appearance here as someone who fails while working all the time serves to highlight the tortured neoliberal political relationship between work and virtue.

centered on troubled families, in which the family often holds a metonymic relationship to the larger nation and the world it inhabits" (103). Clare joins what he identifies as J R's domestic concerns to its well-established situation as a post-modern systems novel. He writes: "That the family ties in Gaddis's *J R* are even more complex and far-reaching than [those found in Faulkner's, Dostoyevsky's, and Tolstoy's family sagas] comes as no surprise since it is the first novel to emphasize the crucial connection between the family and the emerging late-capitalist world system" (104). Clare is right to redirect our collective critical gaze. Gaddis's portraits of marital strife, a potential case of incest, custody battles, the decline of the two-parent families, the increased burden of care on working parents, neglected children, a family dog trapped inside a piece of corporate art, and even an imagined board game called "Divorce" all point to the nearly terminal stress that the "late capitalist world system" has put squarely on the family as a supposedly stabilizing unit of emotional care and economic production. Clare argues that *J R* narrates the corporate world's attempt to invoke the perceived stability and care signified by familial structures and language, citing J R's attempts to market his corporation as a "family of companies" during a decade of economic political, and legal turmoil for American families (e.g., stagflation, Nixon's attempts to end AFDC, and Roe v. Wade, respectively). Clare's article offers a compelling case for reading J R's "American Family of American com[panies]" as an illustration of the ways corporate capitalism turns American nuclear family values inside out in an attempt to "embody" and reproduce itself— often to horrifying, biopolitical effect (578).[17] But Clare's study of the novel doesn't see the

[17] Clare points out Gaddis's penchant for narrating biopolitics to its horrific ends on pages 116-117 of his

dysfunction of the actual families as an opportunity for the characters in the novel to move away from the nuclear family's outdated values and structures, which no longer provide for or organize constituent bodies in desirable ways.

While the corporations and the relationships they entail, as Clare notes, describe themselves in the language of families, the actual families in the novel (populated by people rather than companies) often behave in ruthlessly corporate ways: power struggles, hostile takeovers, and even buyouts of potential future interests are common domestic practices. This is perhaps no more evident than in Stella's incestuous (but to what degree?) attempts to seduce her cousin Edward (potentially her half-brother) to ensure her continued control of the family held General Roll Company (137-143). The Angels entered into their marital relationship specifically to further their commercial interests in General Roll. Gaddis perhaps winks at marriage as merely a property relation early in the novel when Edward's aunt, Anne Bast, reveals that her Stella's married name "was changed from Engels somewhere along the way" (4).[18] The name Angel is doubly ironic here: first, the novel will reveal that neither Stella nor Norman are particularly angelic in their ruthless dealings;[19] second, the obvious allusion to Friedrich Engels in the beginning of the novel, under these circumstances, recalls his claim in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) that monogamous marriage

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article.

[18] Sprinkled into the landscape on which capitalism is running wild are a number of ironically deployed allusions to Marx, Engels, and Marxist thought. Among the most amusing and prominent: the motto appearing in Greek letters on J R's school, "ΕΒΦΜ ΣΑΟΗ ΑΘΘΦΒΡ…" (20), is simply a substitution of Greek letters for "From each accord…"; and the appearance of a cat bearing the name "Chairman Meow," who ends up tragically drowned in the bathtub of the Ninety-sixth Street apartment (722).

[19] Christopher Knight argues that Angel is "a good man," citing his desire to maintain control over the business by keeping General Roll Company private, even if it is less profitable for him personally (99).

> was the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions—on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property. The Greeks themselves put the matter quite frankly: the sole exclusive aims of monogamous marriage were to make the man supreme in the family and to propagate, as the future heirs to his wealth, children indisputably his own. Otherwise, marriage was a burden, a duty which had to be performed whether one liked or not to gods, state, and one's ancestors. (128).[20]

The questions of descent and inheritance should have been obviated, rather than complicated, by marriage. All concerned parties have been operating under the assumption that the composer James Bast is Edward's father, but the possibility remains that Edward's biological father might be his Uncle Thomas (Stella's father) instead. Norman and Stella are, incidentally, not monogamous with each other, even as they rely on the appearance of monogamy as Engels describes it to consolidate their control of the company and keep it from going public (though the novel ultimately reveals that Stella has plans to betray Norman). Both Norman and Stella are concerned about the legitimate claims that Edward's potential illegitimacy would enable him to make on Thomas's estate. In the end, Gaddis (like Edward, as we will see) seems to have no interest in resolving the particulars of this family drama. By ignoring both his family and its business, Edward is

[20] By thinking the family and economics through a rubric of "nature," Engels creates the space for challenges to what constitutes the family under liberal, democratic, capitalist society; offered in such a space, these challenges are not easily undermined by any kind of moral argument in favor of the monogamous family (though since the monogamous family is "naturally" useful under capitalism, perhaps this can be equated with something like "moral virtue"). To this end, *J R* doesn't exhibit any sort of uneasiness about forms of intimate relationality. The absence of monogamy or other normalized sexual behavior seems, in fact, to present opportunities to hold the market at bay and return to practices of mutual care not infiltrated by economic concerns, as Stella does when she simply lets the phone ring while she engages her lesbian lover (353).

finally able to forge new connections of care and companionship and move beyond his compulsion to do specific kinds of work (namely, composing). By the end of the novel, the General Roll Company finds itself suspended between the private and the public in a legal sense: General Roll's future as a family held or publicly offered company is in the hands of the courts, its fate determined by on-going and slow-moving litigation and systems of impersonal global financial transactions.

The monogamous nuclear family—for which Gaddis does not exhibit any particular nostalgia—is in suspense here as well: always pushed to the brink of collapse or radical reorganization by intrusions of market-born dictates of competition, growth, and exploitation, it shows up in various permutations dealing with conflations of various economic, legal, and personal impediments. The instances of this suspension are too numerous to detail here, but the following familial crises should not go without mention: the dissolution of the Eigen marriage; Amy Joubert's custody battle with her Swiss ex-husband; the almost entirely obscure families of workers and stock-holders of Eagle Mills who are put out by J R's cutthroat dealings; Dan and Ann diCephalis, their children, and the "elderly drifter," "Dad," who takes up with the diCephalises under the auspices of a misunderstanding of whose father he actually is (he isn't the father of either) (685). I want to move forward from the novel's argument that the domestic space of the household has been detrimentally infiltrated by and recalibrated to the market logic of an increasingly global and abstract capitalism, to illuminate the under-determined actions, modes of affiliation and care, and interpersonal dispositions that appear within these domestic and

economic networks as a series of alternatives for activating and mobilizing different notions of community, belonging, and togetherness.

The familial tangle of the Basts and the Angels, and the uncertainty facing General Roll, also manage to entangle Jack Gibbs. In addition to being a physics teacher and a frustrated author, Gibbs is a former General Roll employee who holds a small percentage of the company.[21] Gibbs also happens to be a denizen of the Ninety-sixth Street apartment, which accidentally becomes the cluttered headquarters of J R's corporation for a time. The reason for these numerous failures of care is perhaps suggested by the title of Gibbs's perpetually unfinished book about the player piano and mechanization in the arts, Agapē Agape, though Gibbs himself suggests "it doesn't matter why agapē's agape" (405). It is unclear from the novel whether the "gaping" of unconditional and communal love is the impetus for a reorganization of social strategies and the commodification of art or whether this reorganization and commodification itself is somehow detrimental to agapē. In either case, the market as figured in the novel is anathema to notions of love, communal belonging, and obligatory care, familial and otherwise. Christopher Knight observes that in *J R* "society's main institutions—its schools, universities, museums, churches, synagogues, as well as, of course, its manufacturing and retail firms—all find themselves reconceiving what they do in the light of this more encompassing order: cash nexus" (86). Knight's observation echoes Foucault's claim that neoliberalism "take[s] up… the classical conception and the principal that competition, and only competition [rather

[21] In another nod toward its concern with networks, systems, and mechanization, the novel hints that the General Roll Company has moved away from business of producing player piano rolls and into the production of computer punch cards. Gibbs role in this shift is unclear, though the fact that he holds a small stake in the company suggests that it may have been significant.

than notions of equal exchange], can ensure economic rationality" (*Birth* 119). This economic rationality becomes, according to Foucault, governmental rationality.

Gibbs's own domestic situation reveals how the market has insinuated its interest into re-appropriating the language of family and its household. To set the scene: Gibbs has just characteristically limped away from a visit with Rose, his estranged daughter, and is being sought by Norman Angel who has interest in acquiring the stock Gibbs was given by General Roll Company founder and Angel's deceased father-in-law Thomas Bast. Already clear in the following passage are the machinations of the market within supposedly non-market affiliations, as both Angel and Gibbs intrude into the private domestic space of Gibbs's daughter and his ex-wife. Angel attempts to track down and engage Gibbs in some business talk, but, after asking Rose which direction Gibbs went, he is only able to see the community into which Gibbs has vanished:

> He stood there looking after her for a moment and then up the empty block where she'd pointed, breaking that way suddenly in a near trot and looking, down every curb, in both directions, dropping finally to a walk where the elevated limb of a subway loomed ahead off one curb, up the next to stop off balance there and turn abruptly as though sheltering from the wind in the drugstore's entrance, apparently absorbed in Surgical Appliances for the Whole Family as cadenced heels stabbed the pavement passing behind him. (160)

This scene turns synecdochal logic upside down, as the whole grim community stands in for the vanished Gibbs. This inversion of the whole for the part, the generalizable for the unique, the global network for nodes on which it depends, seems to represent the general

threat of invasive corporate practices to neighborhoods and families. Here, the matter of fact advertisement for "Surgical Appliances for the Whole Family" in the drugstore's entrance gestures simultaneously to medical interventions in the family operations of reproduction and care, and to a pathologization of the "Whole Family" itself, extending Moynihan's diagnosis that the African American family is a "tangle of pathology" to white, middle class families like the Gibbs, the Eigens, and the diCephalises.

Gibbs's own "Whole Family" is as dilapidated, disordered, and fragmented as the community that surrounds him, with its disembodied subway "limbs" and "stabbed" pavement.[22] Appearing as a potential shelter from the vacant yet overwhelming environment, the commercial space of the drugstore both indicts and replaces notions of healthy, normative domesticity and care with a manufactured solution ("Surgical Appliances") that relies upon the fragmentation of both the body and the groups within which it assembles for some unnamed malady afflicting the "Whole Family"; it normalizes psychological and physical maladies and promotes commerce and an absurd brand of personal responsibility (DIY surgery) as corrective actions. Confronted by his own sense of disordered belonging and indeterminate value to those with whom he desires intimate connection, Gibbs exhibits his typical response of retreat and avoidance, of Angel, of his responsibilities, of his own creative work.

Angel, acting as an engaged businessman attempting to keep General Roll a family company, illustrates just how intricately interwoven domestic and economic networks are. Angel's marriage to Stella indeed seems to be one of expedience and economic

[22] For readings of fragmentation in *J R*, see: "Chapter Four: J R and the Matter of Energy" in Susan Strehle's Fiction in the Quantum Universe (1992). See also Stephen Matanle's "Love and Strife in William Gaddis's *J R*" in *In Recognition of William Gaddis* (1984).

usefulness, perhaps inverting the idea held by characters like Gibbs and Edward Bast, among many others, that their attempts to sell their labor (for Gibbs, teaching at J R's school; for Bast, first teaching at J R's school and then reluctantly serving as the face of J R's corporate operation while composing "zebra music" for a film) are for the sole purpose of maintaining a seemingly detached private domestic space. Even if Gibbs and Bast don't have functional families of their own, they buy into the capitalist ideology that work is what one does to maintain private family life; for Angel, the intimacy of marriage is in service of his business pursuits, which resembles much older aristocratic or even feudal conceptions of marriage as a property relation between families. For everyone in *J R*, and most of all for J R himself, the corporation colonizes, replaces, and redeploys the comfy language of the family and insists that it is itself "a family of companies."[23]

In a 1980 interview with Tom LeClair not published until 2007—a rare moment of open, nearly public discussion about his own work—Gaddis suggests that the lack of a framework supportive to creative work is a serious impediment to Gibbs's completion of his project: "He takes risks, but he is destroyed because he has not pursued his work to the end. He is not able to sustain his belief that what he wants to do—his book—is worth doing" (21). By channeling, in a way, Richard Nixon's mania for work, Gaddis seems to suggest that a very specific kind of labor here might redeem Gibbs. Yet Gibbs's interpersonal actions, perhaps more so than his work on Agapē Agape, are evidence that the risks he's taking aren't necessarily reducible to "labor," even as they have potentially worthwhile consequences. While Gaddis appears to be interested in work as essential, the

[23] Gaddis's heavy use of ellipses makes quoting from the novel a bit tricky. Where appropriate, I'll fill in phrases that are cut off in the text. Gaddis's ellipses will appear unmodified; following a practice in use by Gaddis scholars, I will place my ellipses in brackets.

way Gibbs evades work on his book anticipates, surprisingly, Jean-Luc Nancy "community" more than it recalls Max Weber's "Spirit of Capitalism."[24] Nancy writes that the primary flaw of the communist ideal is "human beings defined as producers (one might even add: human beings defined at all), and fundamentally as the producers of their own essence in the form of their labor or their work" (2). Gibbs, who is one of the book's few sympathetic and ethical actors, continually defines himself through his failure to complete his manuscript yet he continuously performing acts of kindness and care.

For Gibbs, work does not appear as a necessarily redemptive action perhaps because it is so easily exploited by the brand of corporate capitalism that runs rampant in the novel. As Stephen Matanle observes, Gibbs is the only character in the novel to utter the words "I love you" (to Amy Joubert) (Matanle 110, *J R* 501).[25] This open expression of love—more erotic than agapē —surfaces, along with Gibbs's other exhibitions of generosity, as a significant and meaningful act even as it fails to register within the prevailing corporate calculations of value. Of course, setting aside questions as to whether or not Gibbs's interpersonal risks of generosity matter as much as his artistic ones, Gaddis's assessment of his failure still holds true.[26] After finding a reprieve from a false

[24] Gibbs drunkenly indicts the Protestant ethic and its consequential reverberations, telling Amy that the "problem now's to justify [it]" (477). Bast and clearly opts for another path by abandoning his fear that: "maybe I'll never do anything" (687).
[25] As Matanle points out, Gibbs expression of love is in stark contrast to David Eigen's response when his mother asks him how much he loves her; he replies: "Some money…?" (Matanle 110, *J R* 267).
[26] The relationship between failure, love, and labor is perhaps more fully explored by Gaddis in *The Recognitions* (1955). Gaddis writes: "Tragedy was forsworn in ritual denial of the ripe knowledge that we are drawing away from one another, that we share only one thing, share the fear of belonging to one another, or to others, or to God; love or money, tender equated in advertising, and the world, where only money is currency"(103). Steven Moore, in his *Reader's Guide to William Gaddis's* The Recognitions (1982), notes that a number of these lines come directly from T.S. Eliot's "East Coker." Eliot's poem, characteristically uneasy about the political and economic state of things, seems to anticipate much of Gaddis's own trepidation about notions of "home" present in J R and the inherent hubris at work in a collective faith

diagnosis of leukemia, Gibbs ultimately turns away from Amy, as he does from his book. But unlike the unfinished book, his declaration of love to Amy is already complete, already in excess of (or invisible to) the logic that would seek to figure and configure its market values and network repercussions. Gibbs doesn't pursue his relationship in the expected ways with Amy because to do so would further implicate him in a fundamentally economic relationship, which is to say: not agapistic. To pursue a relationship with Amy would require Gibbs to ostensibly make an investment and a commitment, rather than his typical manic expenditure of emotional energy offered with no expectation of return. Amy ultimately gives into her father's suggestion and marries a man named Dick Cutler, a marriage Amy describes as "like marrying your six percent preferreds" (214). Amy's marriage is essentially a company transaction overseen by her father, who heads one of the large corporate entities (Typhon International) in the novel. Any relationship between Gibbs and Amy necessarily embodies an obstacle for the possibility of agapē because her family and financial ties seem to make her private body indistinguishable from her corporate interests. Love, expressed in this strange way by Jack Gibbs, is valuable precisely because it disrupts the logic of competition and replaces it with care and activates other networks of relationality. Gibbs's declaration of love discloses opportunities for other ways of being together beyond the monogamous nuclear family and the economic system it reproduces, each in the other's image.

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placed in something like an invisible hand. The lifted lines: "Do not let me hear / Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly, / Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession, / Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God. / The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless" (185)

I want to cast Gibbs's declaration as an inversion of what Elizabeth Povinelli calls an "intimate event." She distinguishes between "intimacy" and the "intimate event" by defining the event as "simply the way in which the event of normative love is formed at the intersection—and crisis—of [the] two discourses [of the autological subject and genealogical society]" (4). Povinelli designates the "autological subject" as the aggregate "discourses, practices, and fantasies about self-making, self sovereignty, and the value of individual freedom associated with associated with… capitalism" (4). "Genealogical society," for Povinelli, is the aggregate of society's inherent "discourses, practices, and fantasies about social constraints placed on the autological subject" (4). The intimate event, which for Povinelli can be as innocent seeming as the act of saying goodbye to an intimate partner, is, in fact, disciplined by the sedimented narratives and norms of Enlightenment capitalism and its colonizing urge (5). The intimate event articulates, Povinelli argues, not just "normative love," but also the imperializing power of capitalism, which, in her words, is "power over life and death, power to cripple and rot certain worlds while over-investing others with wealth and hope" (10). Povinelli is careful to not to hold out as redemptive "various tactics of intimacy and sociality emerging diagonally to liberal discourses of individual and social constraint" because "the options presented to those persons who choose, or must, live at the end of liberalism's tolerance and capitalism's trickle, are often not great" (25). She then points out that "to wish for a redemptive narrative, to seek it, is to wish that social experiments fulfill rather than upset given conditions" (25). Gibbs's peculiar and disruptive attempts at intimacy work, however, to navigate Povinelli's cautions, at least to some extent, in ways that suggest

different possibilities for love beyond "the existing conditions" to which expressions of "normative love" contribute. Gibbs's various refusals of his work and his decision to opt out of what appear to be normal and/or healthy relationships— he refuses, in a sense, to kiss his lover goodbye—ultimately seem motivated by his desire to upend the prevailing orders of kinship, love, pedagogy, and economy, all of which have failed him personally in some way. Gibbs does not want redemption for himself, for his work, or as part of his relationship with Amy; he seems perfectly happy to undermine the sedimented order of social and intimate belonging every chance he gets. In fact, the narrative first discovers Gibbs shouting in his physics class, "All right let's have order here, order," only to see him immediately excoriate any notion of order as "simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on reality" (20).

To this end, Gibbs isn't interested in repairing extant systems of order, nor is he interested imposing new ones. Made aware of the faulty diagnosis of leukemia, Gibbs makes a full break with Amy in a puzzling but telling way. Eigen relates their final exchange to Bast: "when she finally called he wouldn't speak to her, heard her voice he pretended he was an old black retainer yas'm, yas'm, dat ole Mistah Gibbs he a genuine rascal to play de ladies so, say he clear out to a place yonder call Burmesquik set him up a little factory there hasn't answered the God damn phone since" (725).[27] Granted the possibility of something like happiness with Amy, Gibbs turns away in such spectacular

[27] The reference to Burmesquick alludes to a 1778 letter from Mozart to his cousin Maria Anna Thekla Mozart in which Mozart relates an absurdist story of a shepherd in either "Tribsterill, where the shit runs into the sea, or Burmesquick, where they make crooked assholes" (137). Bast's reading of this letter, complete with its profanity, leads to his dismissal from J R's school (42). As for Mozart's story: its "conclusion" undermines the very notion of narrative order and expectations by insisting that the hearer sit and wait while thousands of sheep cross a bridge.

and allusive fashion here that it seems the very notion of a secure and ordered life puts him off. Gibbs's participation in blackface here is clearly an attempt to perform his instability and to loudly declare his intention not to lead a life as Amy's corporate companion. By adopting the persona of an "old black retainer" as a way of severing relations, Gibbs reminds us that the American economy and its history of slavery has a long been making love and family impossibilities for non-white bodies.[28] Gibbs then further complicates normative love's relationship to economy, industrialism, and colonialism by assigning himself the role of an industrialist who is setting up shop in Burmesquik, an imaginary village appearing in an actual letter from Mozart to a cousin. Gibbs is familiar with this letter because Bast read it to his music class, an act for which he was ultimately fired. Gibbs's renunciation of love echoes, but with a difference, one of the novel's early scenes (which foreshadows J R's Wall Street ascent), in which J R, acting as a dwarf in Bast's production of Wagner's The Rhinegold, proclaims "Love I renounce forever!" before running off with a sack of money (36). While J R performs a renunciation of love in favor of money, Gibbs renounces recognizable iterations of love, or "intimate events," perhaps because they have become indistinguishable from the economy.

Gibbs's aggressive and active resistance of order and intelligibility, however, is not indicative of a lack of care on his part. Through Gibbs, we begin to see love, as acts of kindness, seeking different routes between bodies and potentially avoiding the stickier,

[28] In "The Fourth Dimension: Kinlessness and African American Narrative" (2013), Nancy Bentley suggests that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the novel was taken up by authors marginalized by the social and political narratives that the novel creates and conditions. Bentley claims that the African American novel and its concern with "kinlessness"—rather than kinship and the "normal" domesticity noted by Armstrong—served as a means of making visible ways of being that had been otherwise occluded. Bentley offers up the idea that this kind of novel can serve as a kind of catachresis—an intentional misspeaking of the family—that serves to give voice to those marginalized by standards of legitimacy (276).

imperializing tangles that Povinelli points out. As such, generosity and care seem to exist as chaotic agents beyond the sort of order Gibbs finds so artificial. It is, after all, Gibbs who repeatedly engages in excessive acts of generosity and exceeding patience as an unruly actor within the corporate network that extends into every space of his life: he drunkenly offers "help and encouragement" to Bast in the form of a key to the Ninety-sixth Street apartment (131); he makes a gift of a handkerchief to J R, who admits that "people don't usually give me things" (338); he rescues Freddie, Amy's developmentally impaired brother, whom the family "keeps put away somewhere," from standing in the rain in a Bob Jones University sweatshirt (618); and in the novel's final scene, he reads Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers* to the disconsolate artist Schepperman in an attempt to calm him down (Eigen reveals that "he's been on page thirty-five for two hours") (724). These moments of bodily and psychological care and material generosity are in direct opposition to J R's own learned practices of self-interest and carelessness, entirely gleaned from his exposure to corporate life and then completely abstracted into economic relations, which he frequently euphemizes into some skewed notion of mutually beneficial "help." The opposition between Gibbs's real attention to bodies and J R's corporate, exploitive, economically inflected interest in others comes to a head when the collapse of J R's corporation obscures from him the collapse of Bast's very real body. Bast asserts: "I'm cold too! I'm dizzy sick at my stomach if I can sit here and listen to you talk about how much this goodwill is worth and this here friend at what makes you think we've got any friends anywhere! How much goodwill do you think we…" (655). Bast's body localizes and concentrates the damage that the J R enacts on the global economy and the people

touched by it. J R's response to Bast's suffering suggests that his own body, his ability to exist, remains intact, even as Bast's body deteriorates because of its contact with J R.

J R's reply to Bast illuminates J R's inability to see and sympathetically respond to his suffering. J R replies: "No wait hey I mean holy shit I don't mean where everybody's crazy about us and all, see goodwill that means the excess of the purchase price over the value of these net tangible assets" (655). J R's concern with "purchase price" and, ironically, "tangible assets" suggest that his character serves to literalize and embody the abstract principle of "limited liability" named by the "limited liability corporation." By illustrating an alternative to callous acts of corporate carelessness, Gibbs's actual acts of goodwill, in spite of—perhaps because of—their fleeting, fragmentary, and chaotic nature, open up space for others to resist the imposition of economic calculations on the body (worth, in one of the novel's character's accounting, "three dollars and a half used to be ninety eight cents") and its set of material and emotional relations (684).[29]

"I'm going to fail at my own": Bast and the Art of Caring

It is in this space of possibility that Bast has positioned himself by the novel's close. In direct contrast to Gibbs's refusal to commit to Amy and his book, Bast's apparent commitment to composing music and to shedding the constraints and intrusions that virulent economic systems and dependencies have foisted upon him suggests that Gaddis sees the creative arts are a locus of this resistance. As he recuperates in the hospital from

[29] The valuation of the body in purely economic terms is undertaken shortly after this scene by Bast's hospital roommate Isadore Duncan: "Price of chemicals in the human body it's worth three dollars and a half used to be ninety eight cents […] good time to sell out try to slow down inflation the whole security market's co, collapsing" (684). Duncan does, indeed, "sell" shortly hereafter.

the terrible effects his work with J R has wrought on his body, Bast is struck by this epiphany:

> I always thought I had to write music all of a sudden I thought what if I don't, maybe I don't have to I'd never thought of that maybe I don't! I mean maybe that's what's been wrong with everything […] just doing what's there to be done as though it's worth doing or you never would have done anything your would be anybody would you" (687).

Later, as he leaves the hospital, where he composed a piece of music in crayon, Bast commits himself to his music because he determines it "worth doing" (715). Gaddis suggests that there is perhaps something redemptive in the figure of Bast that he doesn't see in Gibbs, that "there is hope at the end of the novel. While the corporate system disintegrates, Bast says he is going to write his music. From detritus and trash he vows to make a whole guided by creativity and art" (LeClair 26).[30] But the act of writing music as a kind of work that produces value calculable in terms other than money, I want to suggest, is simply a distillation or condensation of other actions and energetic disruptions that more nearly resemble Gibbs's haphazard acts of kindness and care than a commitment to seeing a difficult task through to completion or artistic drive.[31] Regardless of worth, or

[30] In a like vein, Johan Thielmans claims that Bast's final resolution to realize in the face of its systematic pointlessness "the dream of the communicating his inner vision" has redemptive value (141).

[31] Tim Conley raises an important point tangential to this discussion of completion and excellence that seems to be a possibility for Bast but not Gibbs. Equating Bast's drive to succeed and "rise above" with J R's oft repeated motto that he "plays to win," he writes: "Gaddis may or may not believe, as Rousseau does not, that the concept of property is "natural," but they do share the position that the competitive drive, the desire to be esteemed above others, is…the measure of this esteem, whether it is a dollar value, a grade in school, or cultural canonization, is determined by education. Gaddis's satire pillories the education systems and schemes for the crassness of their measures of success, but not the desire to succeed over others" (136). This assertion is persuasive to a point, and Gaddis's own claims do suggest that he valued esteem and held out hope for his own canonization, but by the end of the novel, Bast seems to empty himself of this drive and

perhaps before a calculation of value can appear, the potential for action Strehle describes is exciting not because Bast will write music but because of the inherent unwieldiness or surprise, to recall Latour, that appears at each moment of action. Bast is able to extricate himself from oppressive tangles of obligation: from J R and his corporation, from Stella, from General Roll, and from his sense that his own creative work is an insufficient legacy for his absent father. More than this, he is finally able to see clearly his own under-determined agencies and the role he can actively play in shaping both his work and the ways he relates to others. In what might even be read as an interesting spiritual alliance with Gibbs, Bast announces "I've failed enough at other people's things I've done enough other people's damage from now on I'm just going to do my own, from now on I'm going to fail at my own" (718). Bast conceives of these potential actions as already failed but nonetheless worth doing because of his newly wrought ethical imperative to consider action based not on what value or advantage is to be gained but rather what damage to the other can be avoided or minimized.

The suggestion that Bast might represent hope because he is going to do valuable work is undermined a bit by his own commitment to failure, but Gaddis's own reading of his novel's final pages also ignores Bast's actual final exit from the novel. Notably, Bast does not vanish away to produce his masterpiece. After his hard-won epiphany, to confine his actions to those of a "composer" or "producer of compositions" hardly seems fair or in the spirit of the ethical calculus he vows to conduct. Recalling Jean-Luc Nancy's desire to

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claims that "I'm going to fail at my own" (718). Susan Strehle offers a slightly broader reading of Bast's declaration, arguing that "only Edward Bast may achieve worthy action. Bast has not accomplished anything by the novel's end, but unlike the others, he has discovered that worth inheres in the actor and the process of action rather than in the completed product" (112).

resist defining human beings "as producers," I want to believe that Bast leaves us with hope because he resists our definitions and opens himself to others in unexpected ways. Bast's actual last act (724) is to take Amy's brother Freddie, who "hasn't changed since he was ten" safely back to her (724, 618). At the novel's close, as in its opening pages, the child poses a persistent problem of obligation and, in the Angel's lawyer Coen's words, an "inconvenience" (13). But significant shifts take place between the scene of the Angels' lawyer's inquiries into questions about Bast's biological lineage and Freddie's continuous need of care. Freddie, in his Bob Jones sweatshirt, encounters a considerably different Edward than the one seduced by Stella and badgered into service by J R. Throughout the novel Bast is taken advantage of, but by the novel's close, he manages to act for himself in surprising and even disruptive ways. Suggesting that the work of composing music itself constitutes a performance, Christopher Knight argues that Bast "understands, more than the others, that the creative artist needs, in some sense, to be a performing artist, particularly if by this we accent the need to get things done, to do the work" (144). In this final act, Bast does "perform" but he doesn't do it in the ways most critical accounts give him credit for. He performs the most essential kind of art "worth doing": caring and attending to the bodily and emotional needs of another with what Gregory Comnes names "an ethics of indeterminacy" engendered by a "commitment to risk and responsible suffering" (89). Called "Peter Pan" by the school board member Hyde earlier in the novel, Bast now fully assumes the role of motley and disruptive caretaker: a child caring for other and with other children (236). Never explicitly established as a legal adult throughout the novel, he has both matured and become more child-like—more of an inconvenience—in

the novel's final pages. As he finally exits the novel, he is clutching his crayon compositions. In this image, Bast appears as really no more than a child himself. His final act of care for Freddie, born only out of an incalculable, even under-determined ethics of care and responsibility to the other, exemplifies and extends a set of values otherwise occluded by the wide-cast web of corporate logic from which there is no obvious refuge.

Reading with Care: J R and Community

On this note, I want to turn finally back towards Gibbs's diagnosis that "agape's agape" in order to consider how the curious formal structure of J R is in itself a kind of tactical resistance to prevailing notions of socially constituted value and worth (405). Understood within the prevailing frameworks of purely economic intelligibility, Bast's final act might be understood as charity. Charity, as a manifestation of agapē and Christian love, is a sign of immanence: of God's presence within a community. Etymologically, agapē comes into its present use out of the "communal religious meal believed to have been held in the early church in close relation to the Eucharist" it once signified (OED). Gaddis's novel offers an account of attempts to rediscover community in the absence of this immanence and the singular order it produces. Yet Nancy suggests that "immanence, were it to come about, would instantly suppress a community"—that the singularity or the order that immanence imposes would assure "that there is no longer any community or communication: there is only the continuous identity of atoms" (12). The form and the content of the novel suggest, peppered as it is with references to T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," that traditional ways of understanding community and "being-together" through what is absent—or "agape"—can only be apprehended as fragmentary and perpetually

fragmented by the virulent and indifferent flows of capital through knotted webs of domestic and financial ties.[32] In a particularly telling narrative intrusion into the text's dialogue, J R is described among the antiquities in the Metropolitan Museum of Art as "an unkempt fragment" who "knelt knotting a knotted lace" (292). Shortly thereafter, the badly scarred gym teacher, Vogel, admits that "disfigurement is just a fact in the wasteland kids live in" (309). But if Gaddis's worldview is articulated by Eliot's "The Waste Land," his literary intervention in the world takes a decidedly different tact: J R, fragmentary and vertiginous as its text appears, actually reveals community and "being-together" as the inescapable ontological condition in the absence or the retreat of immanence. The text's nearly unbroken jumble of unattributed dialogue and the scant descriptive ligature between bodies and spaces presents an overwhelming notion of fundamental community that, as Gibbs suggests in his physics lesson, is necessarily resistant to impositions of organization and order. So even if, as Gregory Comnes suggests, the novel enacts questions about "how an agapistic ethics is possible," those ethics can only be "worthy" as they are emptied of their essence of immanence (87).

This always already "being-together," as Nancy calls it, makes the characters' feelings of isolation and inadequacy all the more tragic; at the same time, the systemic ignorance of this kind of being exposes attempts to control and determine the agency of

[32] In his interview with LeClair, Gaddis admits a bit of surprise and disappointment that Eliot has not been identified as more of an influence, especially in *The Recognitions*. Gaddis on The Waste Land: "I read that in college and it never left me. Keats talks about poetry as being the finest wordings of one's highest feelings. But to find in a poem perfectly articulated your vision of the world is remarkable" (19-20). For more on Eliot's influence on Gaddis, see Miriam Fuchs "'il miglior fabbro'": Gaddis' Debt to T.S. Eliot," collected in *In Recognition of William Gaddis* (1984); and Christopher Knight's "Trying to Make Negative Things Do the Work of Positive Ones: Gaddis and Apophaticism," collected in *William Gaddis: "The Last of Something"* (2010).

these actors within the ironically rigorous twin constraints of "free" enterprise and the Protestant ethic all the more evident as acts of extreme hubris.[33] Nancy defines "Being 'itself'… as relational, as non-absoluteness… as community" (6). To follow this definition is to insist that community is not something that can be made (contrary, for instance, to Latour's "reassembled social," or Deleuze and Guattari's "assemblages," posed outward toward systems of social and political intelligibility): community simply is, and it "cannot arise from the domain of work. One does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude" (31).[34] This seems to be precisely the ethical and ontological notion that Bast grasps when he transforms his fear that "maybe I'll never do anything" into his operational ethical imperative that he doesn't have to do anything, which leads him to consider his own agency as always relational in its essential nature (687). Gibbs, however, with his heavy investment in the Western discourse of the individual subject and his own notions of failure, cannot get beyond the apparent absence of communion. He cannot acknowledge the consequence of his propensity to act out of love as that which "exposes the unworking and therefore the incessant incompletion of community. It exposes community at its limit" (Nancy 38).

Looking, then, to the form of the novel itself, of which so much has been made, I want to propose that Gaddis's act of composition—the very real work of care of which *J R*

[33] Nancy writes that by twisting the ontological principle of "being-together" to "togetherness of being," "we get totalitarianism. By ignoring it, we condemn the political to management and to power (and to the management of power, and to the power of management)" (xxxix). He claims: "Fascism was the grotesque or abject resurgence of an obsession with communion" (17). J R illustrates precisely the struggles of "beings-together" against a political economy ignorant of "being-together" and over-invested in management and power and economic order.

[34] Nancy: "Communication is the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional" (31).

is the product—is an act of love and generosity that "exposes the community at its limit." Contrary to Strehle's suggestion that "by reminding readers how to hate a ruined and ruinous world, Gaddis's fiction intervenes in reality" (94), I want to build on Conley's assertion that the novel's "structure and style inculcate virtues of patience and perceptiveness and ultimately the capacity to recognize the interconnectedness of persons and things in a frantic disorienting world" (128).[35] The novel is itself an act of exposition—an exposure of and at the text's own limits—to the reader of the fundamental and ineluctable community of which the reader is also a part. Even if somehow this novel does teach us how to hate, it is a defensive hate that necessarily appears as a way of maintaining an open attentiveness to other bodies. Gaddis's aesthetic in the novel anticipates and resembles very nearly Nancy's notions of community and communication as conditioned by finitude, as he describes his narrative aims to Tom LeClair:

> What one is always trying to do in writing is get information across... I let this information come through dialogue, through fast talkers like the PR man Davidoff. Not providing the information myself took a great deal of work—paring down, concentrating, arranging each bit where it would fit. I wanted the whole thing in dialogue, in real time. (24).

The characters and events of the novel are always fragmented and only revealed through relationality rather than the individual actions of the characters. Gaddis relies on the

[35] In "This Little Prodigy Went to Market: The Education of J R," collected in *William Gaddis: The Last of Something* (2010), Conley offers the fascinating claim that beyond the obvious representational concerns at work in J R, the novel itself is a work of pedagogy. He continues: "When this model of education is thus observed, it becomes possible to read J R as an educational treatise… To do so reveals the novel's implicit understanding of human nature, a necessary step if we are to appreciate its depiction and estimation of the world in which those humans find themselves" (128).

reader for this communication to occur and for this exposition of a fundamental "being-together." When asked by LeClair if "the noise and waste of the voices" of the novel are "redeemed by the structure," Gaddis responds: "I would like to think so... If one reads J R with care, one can see it as a complicatedly structured fiction. The characters' language may not be elegant, but it expresses who they are" (24). The structure of this novel mimics the possibility of community without essence—or community in its perpetual incompletion as essence. It is a structure that impossibly appears without order, even as Gaddis "took a great deal of work" to make it appear so. What one encounters in the careful act of reading of the text—reading, attending to the characters, and internalizing the formal logic of disorder of this text in ways J R utterly cannot—is the revelation of community itself, even as the novel represents the community it exposes as obscured by the chaotic ordering attempt of social, economic, and political systems and networks.[36]

Of course, however transformational the act of reading this novel might be, the text concludes with J R's repeated failures to throw off, as Bast does, imposed demands for perpetual and unhealthy success. This failure of his broadly figured education, rather than the failure of his corporation, literally haunts the final page of the novel. The last thing we hear is the disembodied voice of the eleven-year old coming out of an abandoned telephone to remind us what might be coming: "And like remember where I read you on the train that time where there was this big groundswill [sic] about leading this here parade and entering public life and all? So I mean I got this neat idea hey, you listening? Hey? You listening…" (726). J R closes with a last reminder that its title character has

[36] Later in the interview with LeClair, in a rather touching exchange that acknowledges just how exposed, open, and under-determined J R is, Gaddis admits that "academics' efforts sometimes cheer me up. Things that never occurred to me are read into my books, and I think, 'My how lucky I was' " (25).

been, essentially, abandoned by those who he seeks to belong. In the absence of reliable welfare, J R becomes the inevitable production of the ideological systems of inattentiveness that run rampant through the novel and, indeed, "public life" as it appears when notions of public good and the commons are replaced with competition.

J R and the Rise of the Counter-Domestic

As we know, Gaddis later fills in a few of the details of J R's entrance into "public life," in the 1987 piece for The New York Times, in which J R has terrifyingly become "Deputy Assistant in the overall policy area" "of the White House Office of Management and Budget" (*Race* 62). As a public policy official, J R makes the expected but no less frightening errors of computation and comprehension that evince deep structural problems in his own education and upbringing. The failures of the institutions J R entertains cutting as he testifies to Congress that "these here low income programs which aren't hardly cost effective like this $1.5 billion for housing and all for these here elderly and handicapped," are precisely the sorts of institutions that failed to provide care to him in his own childhood (Rush 67). The eleven-year old J R looks beyond his own insufficient family for care and belonging, and he finds it in the kinds of financial and industrial institutions for which we see the 1987 version of J R advocate.

In *J R* we see characters scrambling to find care, companionship, and love wherever they can find it. In the chapters that follow, we will begin to see different kinds of affiliation, domestic care, and even family emerging from governmental attempts to supplement the two-parent family, even as economic conditions make its persistence increasingly difficult. By 1996, when Bill Clinton "ends welfare as we know it" by signing

the PRWORA, the kinds of institutions to which J R has no access will appear simultaneously as supplements and threats to the failing two-parent family. J R replaces his actual family with "a family of companies," and he ultimately embodies corporate ethics and ideologies. The following chapters will ask what happens when American fiction, taking its cue from American culture and domestic policy, imagines the inherently capitalist Fordist family as being replaced by various groups and institutions that do not embody or reproduce capitalist ideologies and capitalist subjects.

CHAPTER 2

The Counter-Domestic: Culture Wars, Welfare Reform, and a New Chapter in American Domestic Fiction in the 1990s

When Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in August of 1996, he did more than make good on his 1992 campaign promise to "end welfare as we have come to know it." By signing—or, rather, by failing to veto—this bill, the President endorsed an integral element of a sustained effort to dismantle what was left of the American welfare state. The PRWORA, an overdetermined jumble of conflicted political motivations that can be traced back, at least, to the Richard Nixon's 1969 attempt to end Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), injected ongoing culture wars of the 1990s with the kind of biopolitics Foucault first described in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* as "the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes" (141). While the PRWORA still stands out as a controversial emblem of neoliberal workfare policies, it also stands as the culmination, as Melinda Cooper has noted, of neo-conservative efforts of the 1980s and 1990s (and dating back to at least the Moynihan Report and the New Deal) to link the perceived failure of the welfare state to a perceived failure of the American nuclear family and the decline of the Fordist family wage on which it depended.[1] To wit, the bill wasted no time in quickly

[1] Cooper notes that while the conservative anxieties about the failure of family and family values is fairly easy to grasp, "Neoliberals have always entertained a more complex relationship to the discourse of family crisis. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the enormous political activism of American neoliberals in

declaring that "it is the sense of the Congress that prevention of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and reduction in out-of-wedlock birth are very important to the Government" (101).

Beyond replacing the longstanding Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with the leaner Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and implementing stricter work requirements for cash welfare recipients, the PRWORA continues to funnel federal funds from cash welfare programs to state implemented programs designed to supplement and foster the formation of nuclear families. This political interest in the intimate, private space of the domestic scene aligned with various policy platforms of the late 1980s and 1990s: the continuing "War on Drugs"; Pat Buchannan's notorious 1992 Republican National Convention speech, in which he announced a crisis of morality and declared a "cultural war" for American family values; and President Clinton's other infamous 1996 bill signing, the Defense of Marriage Act. The culture wars of the 1990s, a rubric under which we might view all of these acts, have been cited by Lauren Berlant as an emblem for how American political life turned itself inside out to create, in her terms, "an intimate public sphere" that "renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values" (*Queen* 5).[2]

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the 1970s was inspired by the fact of changing family structures. Certainly Gary Becker, the Chicago school economist singled out as exemplary by Michel Foucault, understood the breakdown of the Fordist family wage to be the critical event of his time, and one whose reverberations could be discerned in everything from shifting race relations to the recomposition of the labor market and the changing imperatives of social welfare" (8).

[2] Berlant has noted that that the lasting results of this conservative political and social triumph have "convinced a citizenry that the core context of politics should be the sphere of private life," and that "[t]he privatization of citizenship has involved manipulating an intricate set of relations between economic, racial, and sexual processes" (*Queen* 3). For Berlant, the1980s and 1990s became the setting for the rise of "[a] conservative coalition… whose aim was the privatization of U.S. citizenship. One part of its project involved rerouting the critical energies of the emerging political sphere into the sentimental spaces of an amorphous opinion culture" (3).

In this chapter and the next, I will entertain the possibility that the PRWORA's attempts to further normalize the nuclear family and its apparently self-evident set of personal values ironically license and invigorate alternative, semi-public replacements for the personal affiliation and care otherwise supposedly provided by the nuclear family. Under the PRWORA, states are encouraged to develop stabilizing "personal responsibility plans" for welfare recipients, which involve the identification of certain goals that enable the recipient of public assistance to ultimately privatize (or re-privatize) the household through the utilization of "parenting and money management classes" or the loosely phrased and liberally interpreted "other things that will help the individual become and remain employed in the private sector" (408.b.2.A.ii).[3] States have gone about pursuing these other methods of fostering "responsibility" and "the formation of two-parent families" through a diverse set of programs ranging from drug and alcohol addiction treatment centers to literacy education programs to marriage preparation and counseling workshops.[4] While these programs appear out of the top-down, prescriptive legislation of the PRWORA, they also organize sets of unwieldy and precarious bodies in ways that resemble Michael Warner's notion of a "counterpublic," which "maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status" (56). Nonetheless, a counterpublic, "against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion

[3] For more on the nature and variety of these state-implemented programs, see Anna Marie Smith's "The Sexual Dimension of Contemporary Welfare Law: A Fifty State Overview" (2001), and, more recently, a 2016 podcast series produced by American Public Media's Marketplace, *The Uncertain Hour*, which, in light of the PRWORAs twentieth anniversary, specifically examines a number of the unlikely programs funded by block grants to the states and justified by the PRWORA's logic to produce and sustain two-parent households.

[4] Lisa Duggan has pointed out that the PRWORA's neoliberal logic "promotes the privatization of the costs of social reproduction, along with the care of human dependency needs, through personal responsibility exercised in family and in civic society—thus shifting the cost from state agencies to individuals and households" (*Twilight* 15, emphasis in original).

and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power" (56).[5] The often stigmatized groups utilized by the PRWORA, such as 12-step programs, adult education classes, and support groups are clearly subordinate to the nuclear family models they supplement, yet by offering alternative modes and values of relationality, these groups are able to criticize and expose the shortcomings of both the nuclear family model and the state that depends upon it.

Bearing Warner's notion of the counterpublic in mind, might we begin to see the PRWORA as actually fostering the need for surprising alternatives to the nuclear family it is trying so desperately to prop up? In this chapter, I explore a representative trio of what I call counter-domestic American novels that appeared in the years immediately leading up to and following the signing of the PRWORA. Like the PRWORA itself, these novels struggle against the overlapping and conflicting political, economic, and cultural movements that attempt to define, discipline, and instrumentalize domestic space and the family by acknowledging such formations as integral to the state's material and ideological reproduction of itself, as Jacqueline Stevens usefully points out when she makes the claim that "political societies constitute the intergenerational family form that provides the pre-political seeming semantics of the nation" (9, emphasis in original). The literary representations of counter-domestic spaces found in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), James Fogle's *Drugstore Cowboy* (1990) and Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son* (1992) attempt to undermine and rewrite the normalized space of the American domesticity and the nuclear

[5] I'm pushing Warner's conception of the counter-public here a bit beyond the sexual and gendered limits he sets for it when he claims that the counter-public can "make possible new forms of gendered and sexual citizenship—meaning active participation in collective world making through publics of sex and gender" (57).

family model as the PRWORA attempts to define it.[6] By claiming these novels as counter-domestic, I am relying on what Foucault's notion of "counter-conduct," which appear as conducts, acts, and habits that are "clearly not absolutely external" to the state but are instead "border elements" of it (*Security, Territory, Population* 214–15). For Foucault, counter-conducts are produced by the state and are intimately tied to the "history of the raison d'État" in a dialectical relationship (357). The counter-domestic as it appears in these novels does not arise in opposition to normal, authorized domestic practice but, instead, it appears from inside the failing relationships, practices, and narrowly habituated acts that we identify as the normal American family life. That all three of these novels were quickly adapted to moderately successful films with cult followings, David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), and Allison MacLean's *Jesus' Son* (1999), serves as further evidence that these stories resonated with the popular and political imaginary of their historical moment.

These novels' embrace of—rather than their resistance to—the privatizing operations at work in the PRWORA makes them difficult to categorize as strictly anti-domestic texts or as novels clearly aligned against a set of ideologies celebrating

[6] While I am relying on U.S. legislation here to frame the counter-domestic in American fiction in a particular moment in the 1990s, it is a genre that operates beyond these texts and across national borders. A brief list of other authors and texts of interest here: William Gaddis, *J R* (1975); Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love* (1987); Douglass Coupland, *Generation X* (1991); Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992); Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1992); Patrick MacCabe, *Butcher Boy* (1994); Sapphire, *Push* (1996); Helen DeWitt, *The Last Samurai* (2000); John King, *The Football Factory Trilogy* (2000) and *Human Punk* (2000); Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000); Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010); Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2007); and Jeffery Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot* (2011). All of these texts, in various ways, employ the novel to highlight the shortcomings of normative domesticity that Nancy Armstrong, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, argues are authored by the domestic novel. Specifically, Armstrong claims that the domestic novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "helped to formulate the ordered space we now recognize as the household, made that space totally functional, and used it as the context for representing normal behavior. In so doing, fiction contested and finally suppressed alternative bases for human relationships. In realizing this, one cannot…ignore the fact that fiction did a great deal to relegate vast areas of culture to the status of aberrance and noise" (23-24).

privatization, "workfare," and personal responsibility. In fact, it is by embracing and animating the logic of privatization at work in PRWORA and longer narratives of what, for lack of a more precise term, generally gets called neoliberalism that the novels also find themselves strangely at odds with the contradictory ideological, cultural, and historical forces that the PRWORA condenses. In these novels, which all track violence, addiction, and the strange routes the characters travel in their efforts to sustain their own lives, the counter-conduct of the counter-domestic resonates with more overtly queer and "improvised forms of affiliation" Elizabeth Freeman calls "scenes of uptake, in which capitalist modernity itself looks like a failed revolution because it generates the very unpredictabilities on which new social forms feed" (*Time Binds* 172). The counter-domestic arises—as we can see in the PRWORA—from within the history of the state, yet it offers a contested, less predictable version of the future where different possibilities for sociability, affiliation, and care might appear, erode, or even flourish. By tracking the kinds of futures and future possibilities imagined by Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, Fogle's *Drugstore Cowboy*, and Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, we begin to see unlikely and unwieldy possibilities and futures for affiliation and care emerging from the most precarious bodies and places.

Fake It 'til You Make It: Belonging to *Fight Club*'s Other Clubs

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, at first glance, seems to offer an uncomplicated and overtly violent rejection of what Berlant calls "that moral-intimate-economic thing called 'the good life'" that appears as the thing the PRWORA's aim to produce and as a thin veil for legislative apparatuses of biopolitical control (*Cruel Optimism* 9). Yet a little

commented-upon element of both the novel and David Fincher's 1999 film adaptation is the presence of the other important (markedly less violent) clubs appearing throughout the narrative's outrageous plot: the support groups the narrator wants desperately to belong to even as he has to fake afflictions and suffering in order to do so. These other clubs represent the kinds of places where, to continue following Berlant's thinking, in the face of "living in worlds that are economically, legally, and normatively not on the side of almost anyone's survival… [n]onetheless, flourishing happens" (*Female Complaint* 32). While *Fight Club*, via its titular club, undertakes the expressly anti-domestic task of literally exploding the supposedly emasculating space of the private home in order "to blast the world free of history," the novels also presents gentler, looser, more improvisational ways of forging meaningful and surprisingly constructive affiliation in its presentation of first the support groups and even in the state psychiatric institution in which its narrator eventually ends up (124).[7]

In the novel, the unnamed narrator details his discovery of his hallucinated alter-ego, Tyler Durden, who has, with the narrator's sometimes witting and sometimes unwitting assistance, founded a fight club for frustrated men. The subsequent expansion of this club into the anarcho-terrorist organization known as "Project Mayhem" channels this collectivized masculine frustration into guerrilla attacks on the privatized and apparently feminized institutions of everyday life in a bleak and recognizable late-twentieth century cityscape: credit card companies, office parks, the narrator's own condo. Palahniuk's narrative—which, in spite of obvious and heavy foreshadowing, only reveals itself as a

[7] This "blasting free" seems a distinctly Benjaminian phrase. See "Theses on the Philosophy of History" where Benjamin writes that "The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action" (261).

fractured delusion quite late in the game—sets about probing this perceived crisis of masculinity for his anonymous, white, bourgeois subject and those he gathers to him in this club-cum-domestic terrorist organization.[8] Nodding toward the late-twentieth century's inability to foster meaningful communities of sociability and care (see the PRWORA), Fight Club's narrator and his alter-ego model the fight club and "Project Mayhem" on the recovery and support groups the narrator compulsively attends in spite of the fact that he does not suffer from the maladies—"brain parasites," "blood parasites," and testicular cancer, to name a few—that form the basis for membership. This feeling of belonging is destroyed for the narrator when Marla, a woman with similar designs on co-opting the support groups for maladies that do not afflict her, invades his space, identifies him as a "faker" and, somehow, causes Tyler to fall in love with her while she inexplicably falls in love with the narrator.

Much has been made, and for good reason, of the perceived misogyny of both the novel and Fincher's film adaptation. Palahniuk's own abrasive persona does little to relieve this perception; in fact, he seems to accidentally re-inscribe the political and economic practices the novel attempts to displace.[9] In the afterward to the 2005 Norton edition of the text, after detailing the popular and cult success of the novel and film, Palahniuk discusses the novel's origins in these curious terms:

[8] The novel seems to intuitively forecast the discursive intelligibility of terrorist bodies as those specifically failed by the nuclear family. Theorizing post-9/11 legibility of terrorist bodies and assemblages, Jasbir Puar writes that "the [only] narrative of trauma that does appear to apply to the terrorist" is as "the deranged product of the failed (western) romance of the heteronormative nuclear family" (53). This is to say that pathological failures to approximate normal domestic practices threaten to produce bodies that will terrorize.

[9] See Henry A. Giroux's "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: *Fight Club*, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence" and Thomas Peele's (somewhat flimsy though well-intentioned) response "*Fight Club*'s Queer Representations"; both essays were published in *JAC* in 2001. Both authors privilege the Fincher's film over Palahniuk's novel.

> I'd seen a Bill Moyer [sic] television program about how street gangs were really young men raised without fathers, just trying to help one another become men. They issued orders and challenges. Imposed rules and discipline. Rewarded action. All the things a coach or drill sergeant would do.
>
> At the same time, the bookstores were full of books like *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and *How to Make an American Quilt*. These were novels that presented a social model for women to be together. To sit together and tell their stories. To share their lives. But there was no novel that presented a new model for men to share their lives. (214)

Palahniuk's rough paraphrase and misapplication of the Moynihan Report's anxiety about fatherless African-American families makes explicit the novel's paternalistic ignorance of the constraining and resonating effects of race, poverty, and gender in these "young boys" and women.[10] The reliance on cartoonishly constructed notions of gender performance at work in both this statement and the novel immediately expose the fact that Palahniuk's project is not actually the presentation of "a new model for men to share their lives." On the contrary, the novel details an attempted recuperation of an old model not nearly in need of such interventions, a model Ruth Quiney identifies as "ideals of national and imperial masculinity with contemporary dreams of escape from the excesses of consumer capitalism" (346). Palahniuk's suggestion that the bourgeois masculine subject is somehow marginalized and under threat enacts an absurd miscalculation that effectively capitalizes on the suffering of those whose lives are actually marginalized. This statement

[10] Palahniuk is clearly attempting to understand this "crisis" through the thoroughly debunked and racist perspective of the Moynihan Report. The narrator pathologizes this situation in equally troubling ways, claiming that "what you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women" (50).

also seems to anticipate the mens' rights activist movement to come. Tyler's telling utopian fantasy, implores us to "'imagine'"

> 'stalking elk past department store windows and stinking racks of beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos on hangers; you'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life, and you'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. Jack and the beanstalk, you'll climb up through the dripping forest canopy and the air will be so clean you'll see tiny figures pounding corn and laying strips of venison to dry in the empty car pool lane of an abandoned superhighway stretching eight-lanes-wide and August-hot for a thousand miles.' (125)

Tyler's apocalyptic vision highlights the politicized notions of self-reliance and personal responsibility in order to celebrate not only the inhered notions and articulations of virile masculinity that Quiney points out but also the fetishisms operative in the PRWORA: the total privatization of state responsibility to the bodies of its subjects and the subsequent diminishing of the (welfare) state itself.

Even in spite of the troubling ways Palahniuk's white-collar, white-everything, bourgeois anti-heroes misapprehend and misappropriate their marginality and the refusals and antagonisms it conditions, the novel animates these refusals and antagonisms toward a lesser-acknowledged critical stance—one Palahniuk's authorial persona attempts to paper over—from which notions of personal responsibility can be problematized with regard to bodily care. On one hand, the characters' violent refusals to participate in the feminized "intimate public sphere," to reengage Berlant's term, appears as a critique of the emasculating conditions of something like post-industrial life. On the other hand, by

violently refusing participation in terms that celebrate neoliberal buzz words like "responsibility," "independence," "competition," "freedom," and Palahniuk's own "young men raised without fathers," the narrative sees as calamitous the possible outcomes such a political investment in the fetish of "personal responsibility" might manifest. This attention to the calamity wrought by a reinvigorated masculinity evinces, perhaps, the workings of a shrewder critical stance than the more bombastic one Palahniuk articulates in the afterward.

In a scene toward the climactic end of the novel, in the "exploded shell of [the narrator's] burned out condo," just before the narrator shoots himself in the face in a final and apparently successful attempt to vanquish Tyler, the narrator admits his culpability in bringing about his own precipitous position: "The world is going crazy. My boss is dead. My home is gone. My job is gone. And I'm responsible for it all" (192-93). Considering this moment of responsibility against an earlier pang of introspection when the narrator wonders if "[m]aybe self-improvement isn't the answer. […] Maybe self-destruction is the answer," I want to suggest that *Fight Club* usefully conflates self-destruction and self-improvement (49). The narrator, by way of his doubled personality, is committed to erasing the possibility for a future contiguous with masculine bourgeois progress while he simultaneously recuperates it with the feminized group hugs and support groups for the chronically and terminally ill that supplement the good life while also providing an alternative to it. By practically equating notions of self-improvement and self-destruction, the novel offers subtler counter-domestic tactics for group belonging and bodily care that are occluded by the novel's more celebrated violent antagonisms. After all, Tyler, the

idealized masculine figure, fails to survive his own machinations, while his more effete, unnamed narrator escapes from the highly competitive space parodied and epitomized by the fight club to the institutional realm of a psychiatric hospital.[11] This final "heaven," as the narrator calls it, constitutes a middle ground between the folksy-but-persistent epistemological frame in which each body might be understood as "a sacred, unique snowflake of special unique specialness" and Tyler's nihilistic valuations that "we are… crap or trash" (207); from this middle ground, the narrator claims, without prejudice or malice, that "We just are." In the novel's final pages, the counter-domestic, semi-public institutional space of the psychiatric institution produces—against all expectations—a livable alternative space for the narrator between what might be seen as the more obviously domestic space of his now exploded apartment and white, bourgeois life and the more visibly anti-domestic and destructive space of the fight club. The counter-domestic spaces of the support groups and the psychiatric institution appear out of the logic of late capitalism's biopolitics, yet they foster ways of life and modes of affiliation that threaten to produce other ideologies and modes of life.

At its core, then, the narrator's struggle in *Fight Club* is to find and sustain support groups and communities founded on missions of caring for terminal and otherwise hopeless bodies. These groups appear in stark contrast to the violent masculinity performed by the fight clubs, emerging as other modes of affiliation necessarily divested from the intertwined logics of progress and investment and the bodily instrumentalization they require. The narrator even drops hints that his recount of the fight club and Project

[11] Palahniuk has recently, with the 2016 publication of the graphic novel *Fight Club 2*, resurrected Tyler Durden.

Mayhem might even be turning the novel itself into a kind of supportive space: the narrator tells us that "you never give your real name at support groups," and, unsurprisingly, he never gives his real name in the novel (168). To imagine the narration itself as the act of probing for emergent recognition of the unimaginably supportive other is to banish the regimented, goal-oriented, fascist fight club as that which cannot fulfill Palahniuk's promise of new possibilities. The narrator confesses that his love for the support groups comes from their practices of irrational care, which see the body as it is rather than as a set of economic outcomes or productive possibilities. These groups are freed, in some ways, from a notion of recovery, and this freedom generates new attentions that in turn generate new possibilities for affiliation, intimacy, and care. "[I]f people thought you were dying," the narrator explains, "they gave you their full attention. […] And when they spoke, they weren't telling you a story. When the two of you talked, you were building something, and afterward you were both different than before" (107).

At the moment of narrative climax in the novel, when it seems that skyscrapers will explode and Tyler and Project Mayhem will succeed against the narrator's will, Marla and the support groups on which narrator relied before the fight club return to him in their impossible strangeness:

> Behind Marla, all the bowel cancers, the brain parasites, the melanoma people, the tuberculosis people are walking, limping, wheelchairing toward me.
>
> They're saying, "Wait."
>
> The voices come to me on the cold wind, saying, "Stop."
>
> And, "We can help you."

"Let us help you."

Across the sky comes the whop, whop, whop of police helicopters. (204)[12]

Marla mobilizes these support groups by explaining the narrator's own difficult psychological, life-threatening situation to them. By revealing the degree to which he was faking his afflictions, Marla ironically marks the narrator as a suitable and legitimate member for inclusion in their ranks. These "walking, limping, wheelchairing," and concerned bodies, even as the narrator plays their approach for a laugh, represent the most alluring of three possibilities here: annihilation by the "whop whop whop" of the repressive state machine, annihilation by himself/Tyler, or a surrender to these soft communities cohered by their own lack of a future. In this far-fetched finale, the narrator seems somehow to split the difference between each of the three of these possibilities: he pulls the trigger and blows off half of his face; this also apparently does away with Tyler and relegates the narrator to a life within the confines of a psychiatric institution.

The revolutionary affiliation embraced by the novel's narrator in the climactic scene is not, ultimately, the fight club's extremist effort to shed the bourgeois trappings of post-industrial life; instead, it is narrator's surprising instrumentalization of the supplemental institutions—Foucault's "border elements"—of late-twentieth century bourgeois life (the support group and the psychiatric hospital) to challenge and to overwrite our conceptions of both the good life and progress. The support groups—all of which are attached to terminality (bowel cancer, melanoma), chronic debilitating

[12] Fincher's film offers a decidedly different ending here, one far less interesting in its attendant possibilities for the narrator (whom some film critics refer to as Jack): Marla shows up alone; the bombs do go off. There is no denouement in the scrubbed space of the mental institution; Tyler's success, even in his "death," is complete as the skyscrapers topple around Marla and Jack who appear as a kind of Adam and Eve, ready to found a new civilization.

conditions ("brain parasites"), or reproductive impossibility (a testicular cancer survivors' support group called "Remaining Men Together")—give evidence of the narrator's agnostic, even antagonistic disposition toward the future. Through these groups and the narrator's desire to belong to them, the struggle over the reproduction of the recognizably good life never really happens between the overt antagonism of Project Mayhem and the society it wants to destroy; instead, this struggle emerges from the utterly strange and less-immediately threatening groups that appear as way to sustain what is good and normal. By holding out these support groups as a viable alternative to the good life, Palahniuk almost anticipates Lee Edelman's notion of a repro-futurity resistant "queerness" that "would deliberately sever us from ourselves, from the assurance, that is, of knowing ourselves and hence of knowing our 'good'" (5). Edelman immediately goes on to draw a distinction vital to how I want to understand the anxieties and contradictions within late-twentieth century bourgeois life that *Fight Club* animates by claiming that "[s]uch queerness proposes, in place of the good, something I want to call 'better,' though it promises, in more than one sense of the phrase, absolutely nothing" (5).[13]

The "better" the narrator ends up with, a life lived within the confines of a psychiatric hospital, is precisely at odds with good life he once seemed to have. And yet, the final institutionalized domestic situation the narrator arrives as does, surprisingly and

[13] Edelman "connect[s] something better with Lacan's characterization of what he calls 'truth,' where truth does not assure happiness, or even, as Lacan makes clear, the good. Instead, it names only the insistent particularity of the subject, impossible fully to articulate and 'tend[ing] toward the real." This truth, Edelman continues, "finds its value not in a good susceptible to generalization, but only in the stubborn particularity that voids every notion of a general good" (5). It is also important to note here that Edelman's polemic seems to find its exigencies in the same political and historical moment as *Fight Club*. Edelman uses President Clinton's 1997 appearance (with Hillary and Chelsea) in a series of public service announcements for the "Coalition for America's Children" as an example of the incredible political power present in the image of the child as future.

perversely appear as the "new model for men to share their lives" that Palahniuk claims to present in this novel. This model, however, doesn't appear in the ultra-masculine, ultra-competitive ways that earn the novel its cult following and also make it subject to so many allegations of misogyny and misanthropy. Instead, we might look for this "new model for men" in the communal, attentive and ostensibly feminized spaces of the support groups. In some inexact but interesting ways, the novel isn't about embracing a dormant masculinity; it is about figuring ways to hold the impositions of masculinity and fetishized neoliberal competition at bay. This is no mean task given that Palahniuk has to construct such a Rube Goldberg of a plot simply to allow the narrator to get out of performing his own heteronormative gender and its implied domestic tasks. By holding the impositions of masculinity and neoliberal competition at bay, perhaps Palahniuk's novel and the "better" life it imagines do what Edelman says they shouldn't be able to do: promise, even in the most tenuous of ways, something where nothing should be expected. By the end of the novel, after all, the reason the narrator "d[oesn't] want to go back, not yet" is "[b]ecause every once in a while, somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches, and he says: 'We miss you Mr. Durden" (208).

Drugstore Cowboys, T.V. Babies, and Junkie Fathers

While Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (and to a lesser extent Fincher's film version) probes late-twentieth century masculine anxiety in order to find the perverse counter-domesticities nested within attempts to resist a distinctly dystopic neoliberal vision of society, James Fogle's 1990 novel *Drugstore Cowboy* and Denis Johnson's 1992

collection *Jesus' Son* attempt to find and animate "better" but not "good" possibilities for the future that emerge from within the supplemental therapeutic frameworks developed by and deployed within American political systems, ultimately exemplified by the PRWORA. That both Fogle and Johnson set their narratives in the 1970s connects the late 1980s and early 1990s anxieties around American family values to the moments the family's economic foundations were eroded.[14] As I noted in the previous chapter, the decade began on the heels of Richard Nixon's failed attempt in 1969 to reform welfare by doing away with AFDC and then immediately served as the stage for his presidential veto of the Comprehensive Child Care Bill of 1972. The 1970s also witnesses the beginning of the neoliberal deregulation and financialization of the U.S. economy that became fully realized during the Clinton 1990s. Through their historical setting, these novels tie the anxieties of their moment of early 1990s publication to the formative decade when the American neoliberal movement, with its attendant anxieties about the social utility and perceived decline of the American family life, was gathering and consolidating its political power.

Fogle's *Drugstore Cowboy* (written while Fogle was in prison), and Van Sant's 1989 film adaptation of the then-unpublished novel, take a similar myth of rugged, outlaw

[14] Cooper notes that "a bipartisan consensus on the basic premise of redistributive social welfare existed right up until the 1960s. Until this time, Democrats and Republicans alike were committed to the redistributive policies of the family wage, although they were divided on the questions of whether or not it should be extended to African American men" (32). "By the late 1970s," Cooper then claims, "this consensus had given way to a comprehensive critique of the welfare state tout court. Critics on the left and right now accused AFDC—and by extension the welfare state itself—of radically undermining the American family and contributing to the problem of inflation. In response to this crisis, they now called for a much more dramatic reform of welfare than they themselves had hitherto imagined… even the private institution of the family was to be strengthened as an alternative to social welfare. Welfare reformers now looked back to a much older tradition of public relief—one embedded in the poor-law tradition with its attendant notions of family and personal responsibility—as an imagined alternative to the New Deal welfare state" (32-33).

individualism and spin it into a perverse set of possibilities for affiliation and care. Whereas *Fight Club* problematizes cultish individualism and its ironic relationship to normalized practices of care in order to suggest as an alternative the seeming dead-ends of marginal institutionality and terminality, *Drugstore Cowboy* highlights the ways individualism, personal responsibility, and attempts to correct and rehabilitate these values can be channeled towards the future via unexpected and improvised counter-domestic practices and their perverse mapping onto familial relationships. These emergent perverse relationships threaten to produce and proliferate unmanageable and precarious subjects and ideologies. Fogle's novel tells of the life, criminal acts and affiliations, attempted rehabilitation, and tragic death of Bob Hughes, a drugstore bandit who appears as some sort of funhouse mirror reflection of "personal responsibility" and rugged, American individualism. Bob understands his own criminality in ethically unimpeachable terms: he is not stealing narcotics so much as taking back what he already considers his own: "It's mine" Bob remarks early on in the novel, "and we're just going in there and picking up my narcotics" (36). As Cindy Fuchs observed in a review of Van Sant's adaptation, "*Drugstore Cowboy* is less about drugs than it is about an American obsession with individualism in the face of failed myths and mediated pleasures" (43). In the face of these failed myths, then, of both individualism and a distinctly idealized form of the American family, *Drugstore Cowboy* turns toward the improvised affiliations of its abject characters to imagine the perverse and unintended counter-domestic possibilities of attempts to rehabilitate and discipline non-compliant bodies.

While the novel begins after Bob's time in prison and is more about him avoiding rehab than it is about his attempts to get clean, Bob's recollection of his time in prison and his later attempt at rehabilitation in a methadone clinic illustrate the ability of these state-run, nominally therapeutic programs to reinvigorate bodies in unwieldy ways and toward unexpected ends. "Doing time to Bob," the novel explains, "was just a good way to regain his health and build up his veins" (74). Prison restored Bob's body not for use as a better citizen but instead as a more effective junkie. The novel acknowledges the state's interest in using the prison system to rehabilitate bodies as little more than propaganda, and the novel's omniscient but opinionated narrator notes that prison offered "a few loosely run, half-assed programs… But by then Bob was older and no one even considered placing him in a rehabilitation program" (75). While set in the 1970s, the novel wears its opinion of the on-going "War on Drugs" of the 1980s and 1990s and its attendant prison-industrial complex on its sleeve, proclaiming that, "in Bob's mind, the real villains were the unthinking bureaucrats, the sadistic police officers, and above all, the politicians" (77). The novel provides an insider's (i.e., Fogle's) perspective, and it voices a withering account of the disingenuous lip-service political platforms give to notions of rehabilitation. And yet Bob's time in prison is restorative and invigorating: it restores his body for additional intravenous drug use, and it invigorates him towards continued criminality and state antagonism rather than civic responsibility, as the novel claims that prison makes prisoners "even more bitter and insane" (77).

While prison (which certainly qualifies as a border element of the state) malfunctions similarly to the other counter-domestic spaces I am presenting here, I'm

more interested in the ways Bob's experiences in prison motivate his practices of affiliation after he is released.[15] The social and intimate worlds Bob that tries to participate in after he gets out cohere around practices that are incomprehensible under a market-based rubric evaluates the future abstractly based on good and bad investments and upward and downward mobility. Statements like "Bob was older and no one even considered placing him in a rehabilitation program" suggest Bob's body and its abilities are unworthy of investment. While explaining to his crew his absurd aversion to dogs, hats, cats, and the bad luck they bring, Bob shows the extent to which he had internalized the low valuation of his life when he remarks, "But anyway, you can put into motion your future that way, and it can be either good or bad. In any case, we just don't want to take the chance" (70). As his intimate crew of bandits (his wife Diane, and his partners Rick and Nadine) understands it, Bob is announcing that they will under no circumstances get a dog. But his statement that the future "can be either good or bad," and that "we just don't want to take the chance," indicates an urge to abandon any hopes for the future while still making plans to proceed into it. By emptying the future of possibilities for good and bad, *Drugstore Cowboy* finds a sort of kinship with Edelman's insistence on "better" not "good," as well as *Fight Club*'s narrator's desire to be taken into supportive communities of futureless bodies. In *Drugstore Cowboy*, however, Bob embraces, or attempts to, the strange possibilities of futures that appear. The future is worth proceeding into, but that future must be understood without the normalizing value judgments of good and bad.

[15] Prisons and the exponential rise in U.S. incarceration rates are obviously an unavoidable element in larger discussions about the rise of neoliberal biopolitics after the 1970s, but this is another project.

When the novel attempts to find images of the future, it relies on the figure of the nuclear family and the children it is supposed to produce. Edelman announces his opposition to the political obsession with repro-futurity and its impossibly idealized and symbolic figure of the child. Edelman writes that "The Child … marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism" (21). In ways all too familiar to Edelman's polemic, Bob often relies upon the parent-child relationship as a sturdy analogy for understanding his own intimate entanglements. Bob has no children of his own. His wife Diane has children, but they are not Bob's and she unremorsefully abandons them to join Bob's holdup crew. In a strange passage, after deciding to get clean for purely superstitious reasons (he believes a hex is on him and that his good luck has run out), Bob explains his motivations for taking dope to his counselor, Miss Simpson, at the methadone clinic:

> When you ask a dope fiend why he uses, it's just about like asking a normal person why he likes sex. And I suppose different people will come up with different answers, ranging from it just feels good to I can't resist the urge, to it's all part of love, to I only do it to have children. Miss Simpson, A dope fiend will give you just about the same answers, with the exception perhaps of the last one. I've yet to hear a dope fiend claim he shot dope in an attempt to have children, but I've heard all the rest. And I've even heard dope fiends claim that good old heroin is better than any woman they ever had. (184)

The unwieldy analogy Bob draws complicates Edelman's claims about the way the child is symbolically instrumentalized. This passage is noteworthy not because it eroticizes narcotic pleasure but because conflates that erotic pleasure with the familial notions of obligation, compulsion, love while rejecting the reproduction these notions are often associated with.

Bob attempts to walk back the comparison when its logic becomes absurd, yet throughout the novel and the film, Bob sees familial dynamics torqued and leveraged where no obvious families exist. Fuchs, in her review, writes that "The film constantly inverts and reforms the clichés of conventional family bliss" (45). Likewise, in Fogle's novel, Bob admits that teaching Nadine and Rick the intricacies of his trade is

> like trying to raise a couple of goddamn kids… All the hassles, all the petty jealousies, all the what-ifs… Maybe I should have taken up a trade in prison when they were trying to teach everyone one; came out, picked you up, got your kids back and went that route. Jesus, I can just see us now, fighting all goddamn day long and drinking all night to keep from fighting in the morning… frustrated from dawn to dark every goddamned day because we know there is a better way because we've had it better. (138)

For Bob, the symbol of the child remains suspended between the debilitating anxieties produced by normal family life and the perpetuation of a sustained resistance to the normalizing forces of that life. Bob earnestly believes that narcotized bliss and the future it threatens represent an attainable and better (though not "good") way of life. And in this passage, he admits that the future he imagines is both informed by ("like trying to raise a

couple of goddamn kids") and yet in opposition to ("there is a better way because we've had it better") normalized notions of the good life.

In the novel's closing pages, Bob submits to something like compliance and rehabilitation when he checks into the methadone clinic and finds a job. Importantly, though, he remains unmotivated by anything resembling normalized values, even as he seems to submit to them. Encountering an old friend named Tom in the lobby of the hotel in which he lives, Bob feels immediately obligated to this precarious figure. Bob sets about helping Tom navigate the difficult requirements to get into the methadone clinic.[16] To get Tom admitted to the methadone program, Bob has to get enough drugs into Tom's system to produce visible symptoms of withdrawal, and so in this instance, the ethical care of a futureless body takes on some rather strange dimensions. Bob feels obligated to Tom out of a sense of childlike reverence and awe, noting that Tom "and his wife, Sally, they must have shot more than a million bucks' worth of dope in their arms. They always were good people… They took care of anybody who needed help" (191). The familial dimension of husband and wife (or, in the film, the implication that he was a defrocked priest named Father Tom), the profligate waste of "more than a million bucks," and the ethical obligation to help others all point to a familial dynamic that performs in very strange ways. For Bob, the care he repays Tom with consists of multiple bags of drugs and a willingness to give Tom some of Bob's own dirty urine so he can be assured admittance to the program.

[16] In the novel, Tom is an old junkie Bob recognizes from his youth; in Van Sant's film, this old friend has notably become a self-described "Defrocked Junkie Priest" (played by William S. Burroughs) who was beloved among junkie kids for sharing his dope. In the film, Burroughs's Tom waxes prophetic about the less than pure motivations behind the coming "War on Drugs."

Bob is energized and motivated by his relationship and his obligation to Tom, and this strange network of domestic obligation and affiliation comes into sharp relief with other emergent domestic practices in the novel's final scenes when Bob is murdered by a couple of junkies who believe he's holding. As Bob is being repeatedly kicked, a calm comes over his body. In this moment, he decides that the junkies who are kicking his body were just doing what they saw on television. Bob names them "the fucking TV babies," and he wonders in a bizarre moment of curmudgeonly conservatism, "What was the world coming to with all these TV babies? What were people going to do once they realized that they had raise a whole new breed of little monsters, who were so tuned in to the tube that they looked nowhere else for advice and mental stimulation" (210).[17] The irony of Bob's grouchiness aside, this moment illustrates what Bob believes he's up against: a future full of babies where the narcotized feelings of joy and even despair are replaced by the banalities of "animal crackers and cold breakfast cereal" (210). But "The sad part," according to Bob, is that "it was all so stupid… Who would ever go to a fleabag hotel to rob a mark. Nobody but a stupid TV baby" (210). In the midst of his own murder and his sadness about the seeming inevitability of a mediated and scripted future, what really bothers Bob, even as he is dying, is that these kids just aren't adhering to the right code of conduct.

[17] Cindy Fuchs identifies this as a moment of fraught hypocrisy. She points out that Bob, in an earlier scene where he plays a violent practical joke on a couple of police officers, takes pleasure in exactly the same kind of violence he here demeans as juvenile and monstrous (45).

Unimaginably Better: "All these weirdos, and me"

While Fight Club and Drugstore Cowboy hide the desire to be cared for in institutional, counter-domestic, and other non-familial beneath masculine aggression and crime, Denis Johnson's 1992 linked short-story collection *Jesus' Son* provides a quieter and more boldly optimistic set of possibilities for the nearly functional counter-domestic spaces that appear in the face of 1970s domestic breakdowns. Johnson's collection injects a strain of optimism into the counter-domestic situations, and in doing so he seems to offer an alternative vision to Edelman's pronouncements about the future and Berlant's skepticism about optimistic notions of the good life. In the collection's final story, "Beverly Home," Johnson's narrator—who is sometimes referred to as Fuckhead—offers the following take on the soft landing he's finally experienced working at a nursing facility in Phoenix after numerous attempts at treatments and recovery from his own addictions: "All these weirdos, and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them. I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us" (133). This notion of getting better seems initially intelligible in the most conventional ways, yet the narrator's rehabilitation has led him not back towards recognizable notions of the good life but instead toward a some murkier, less readily adoptable notions of what daily life might look like.

The narrator comes to this recognition of "getting better" after navigating a desolate 1970s American landscape. The episodic stories in this collection follow the narrator down routes forged by his own heroin and alcohol addictions, a series of failed relationships, a number of intimate yet accidental encounters with others, and finally

something that appears to be the recovery he gestures toward in this final passage. The stories take interest in the failure of existing domestic structures and strategies to function for the narrator and his similarly marginal companions: in "A Car Crash While Hitchhiking," the narrator, who has abandoned his own wife and child, witnesses a car crash that kills the father of a young family; "Work" finds him helping to strip an acquaintance's abandoned home of its copper wire for the paltry sum of fifty-six dollars, which the men immediately use to get drunk; in "Emergency," he works, hopped up on pharmaceuticals, as an orderly at a hospital and attends to a man who has been stabbed in the eye by his wife; and in "Dirty Wedding," he goes with his girlfriend to an abortion clinic where he clumsily and shockingly asks her "What did they stick up you?" (77).

In "Beverly Home," the narrator offers a series of fragmented glimpses that reveal the intriguing understanding he has forged out of his "recovery," which includes his participation in the twelve-step programs Narcotics and Alcoholics Anonymous, his part-time work at the Beverly Home, and, most surprisingly, his voyeuristic obsession with a Mennonite couple on whom he spies daily outside their home. The constellation of these three pursuits suggests to the narrator something like the "getting better" he references, yet this move toward whatever is "better" requires his adoption of practices that can't be neatly reconciled or even understood under the rubrics provided by rehabilitative programs (like, for instance, "the good life") or the Mennonite household he sees as some beautiful ideal beyond his reach. The narrator's claim on personal improvement approximates Edelman's notion of "better" without "good" because the narrator begins to imagine his own daily life in yet-to-be defined terms that exceed the narrowly habituated

practices of normal family life that rehabilitation should move him back within. This "getting better" repudiates "the good life" and the unattainable happiness it promises. Exceeding notions of "good" or "bad," this strange rehabilitation that isn't really a rehabilitation excavates possibilities for (re)humanizing other bodies that are beyond the reach of something like the nuclear family home.

But what excesses and unlikely possibilities for the future do these excavated possibilities expose? The narrator turns towards modes of participation in domestic life that initially appear as abject and perverse when he integrates a peeping-tom routine into his daily schedule. He relates what this routine entails and provides to him in the following passage:

> As for the Mennonite couple, you could almost say that our schedules were coordinated now. I spent a lot of time outside their building, after sundown, in the rapidly cooling dark. Any window suited me by this time. I just wanted to see them at home together. […]
>
> I got so I enjoyed seeing them sitting in their living room talking, almost not talking at all, reading the Bible, saying grace, eating their supper in the kitchen alcove, as much as I liked watching her naked in the shower. (127)

While the narrator's fetish for the quotidian functions of the household unavoidably suggests that his most secret and unspeakable urge is something as innocuous as inclusion within the routine practices of domestic life, this longing remains more complex and more potent than that because he wants to participate without capitulating the established domestic norms. He wants to remain outside. By synching his own daily schedule to the

internal rhythms of this household, the narrator experiences something like the dislocation of jet lag as he attempts to live in a different time than the one his body actually inhabits. Elizabeth Freeman describes instants like this as "the synchronic aspect of habitus out of joint meet[ing] the diachronic aspect of generationality," and she notes that such experiences of queer time might engender not Edelman's turn toward "better" as a repudiation of existing notions of reprofuturity and the good, and not Walter Benjamin's "weak messianic" turn toward the suffering of the past, but, instead "a commitment to bodily potentiality that neither capitalism nor heterosexuality can fully contain" (*Time Binds* 19). In the passage above, the narrator confesses to being promiscuous with his time, merging his own daily routine with the Mennonite woman's in clandestine and nearly sexual ways that are immediately legible as perversions, but these actions also signify in other unwieldy and "better" ways of inclusion that are too immediately foreclosed by the neoliberal attempt to instrumentalize the privatizing force of heteronormative domestic practice, as evident in the PRWORA and other attempts to legislate "the good life."

Immediately following the passage above, the narrator describes what he hopes is going to be sex but what turns out to be, instead, a rather intense fight between the Mennonite couple. After this fight, the woman nearly discovers her on-looker when she pulls back the curtain of her bedroom window. The narrator remains obscure because "it was dark out and she could only have been looking at her own reflection" (129). From across the impenetrable divide between the internal limit of the house to the dark external world that its own reflection holds back, the narrator imagines emerging from the "dark

side of her" to provide comfort: "I thought I heard her weeping. I could have touched a teardrop, I stood that close" (129). Hiding behind the anachronistic, reflected image of the Mennonite woman is the potentially threatening figure of the narrator as he misappropriates their sacred schedule of domestic time toward his own curious rehabilitation; however, Johnson's usually affable yet ineffectual narrator resists easy identification as a threat in this scene; instead he both does and does not appear as the possibility of comfort, of reparative action, of outside supplement to the internally shaken structure of the home. The possibility is acknowledged, but his body remains hidden. This scene threatens to shatter the smooth, reflective surfaces of the home and replace them with the immediate and jarring occasion of touch.[18] The internal strife of the domestic scene and the narrators' abject banishment outside the home ironically open the household outward to other extra-familial, extra-domestic possibilities and affiliations that appear out of what is initially legible as perversion.

Through the profligacy of the narrator's imagined touch within the religiously constrained sexual economy of the Mennonite household in the text, he is able to intuit this urge as a bodily act. In doing so, the narrator initiates these other bodies into a world of different and differently understood practices of touch that become practices of both sociability and care. The initiation into an economy of touching pushes back against more dominant systems of intelligibility that limit, misunderstand as intrusive and menacing, or occlude altogether the emergent possibilities of this touching exchange. Jasbir Puar's posits that "[t]actile economies reassert ontological rather than epistemological knowing,

[18] Maclean's film adaptation takes a beautiful liberty with this scene: Billy Crudup as FH (Fuckhead) reaches magically and ecstatically through the pane of the window and does, in fact, touch the head of the distraught Mennonite woman.

and highlight touch, texture, sensation, smell, feeling, and affect over what is assumed to be legible through the visible" (194). The narrator's touch here doesn't neatly signify in readily comprehensible ways; its possible intrusion, in fact, menaces the secure, private space of the home and the political systems founded on the sanctity (and the hidden production) of privatized space and private property, but taken out of systems of such sedimented epistemologies, this touch also uncovers emergent possibilities for being intimately together, for offering care, for understanding in newly ethical or ontological terms the perpetual emergence of the desires that do not signify within the limits of private domesticity and its established practices and roles.

While the addiction support groups and the Mennonite household serve simultaneously as the space of the narrator's discovery that his desires exceed the boundaries of normalized conceptions of the good life, the Beverly Home provides a more generous and permissive space for the narrator to experience these urges and to intuit their immediate, bodily—even ontological—significance. Beverly Home conceals bodies that even the narrator acknowledges "couldn't be allowed on the street with their impossible deformities [that] make God look like a senseless maniac" (116); yet beyond simply concealing these bodies from the functional and synchronized operations of daily routines, the home, like the twelve-step programs, enables the formation of different kinds of intimate bonds and possibilities for affiliation that are otherwise foreclosed by the normative space of the family home. The narrator's job responsibilities offer a more practical image of these possibilities:

> I was responsible for the facility's newsletter, just a few mimeographed pages issued twice a month. Also it was part of my job to touch people. The patients had nothing to do but stumble or wheel themselves through the wide halls in a herd. Traffic flowed in one direction only, those were the rules. I walked against the tide, according to my instructions, greeting everybody and grasping their hands or squeezing their shoulders because they needed to be touched and they didn't get much of that. (116-17)

Beverly Home appears here as a warped and miniaturized reflection of what Berlant describes as "an intimate public space" that "renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values" (5). Within this space, the production of communality proceeds from marks of perceived disability and the inability of these bodies to produce recognizable, and thus exchangeable, value and sellable labor. Obviously, this sort of belonging—this uncomplicated and freely accessible participation of a community that finds its formal expression in the newsletter—cannot extend beyond the confines of the Beverly Home because this kind of community can only register as oblique and dysfunctional in the hegemonic terms of both American (and thus global) capitalism and the privatized and functioning family that serves as its icon and the site of biological and ideological reproduction. The Beverly Home, like the twelve-step programs, is legible only as institutional rather than domestic: solely as an oblique supplement to normal, happy life. Yet thinking of Beverly Home as a replacement for that which is supposed to supplement opens up new realms of possibility for the bodies it houses. By turning Beverly Home into a counter-domestic space, the narrator renders as

human these monstrous and monstrously unproductive and marginal bodies. By attending to these bodies as participatory subjects rather than as biopolitical waste, the narrator calls into question such operative notions as "the good life," dignity, and the political and social systems that such notions create, animate, and perpetuate.

The Beverly Home finally suggests to the narrator ways of functionally identifying or belonging that exist beyond the notice and the obvious interest (though clearly not beyond the power) of the legitimating and regulatory operations of the state, even as these practices exist precisely as regulatory measures. The touching of strangers on display here potentiates a radical ethical stance that approximates Tim Dean's intriguing read of gay male cruising practices in which he celebrates as exemplary "the intimate encounter with the other that does not attempt to eliminate otherness" (180). The narrator carefully attends to these others in their strangeness without otherwise recognizable political, social, or, in the terminal cases, even material futures; this attention, then, suggests not a lack of interest in a political project but instead a distinct interest in letting it remain loose, unbound, and full of divergent possibilities. What inadvertently emerges from this collectivized abjection of this counter-domestic space in the era of American neoliberalism and its biopolitical project is a set of counter-political actions—unintended tactics, perhaps—whose animating motivations are bodily immediacy rather than the deferred future, and disposability rather than investment. The future holds no promise of recovery, recuperation, or return on investment yet still worthy of investment, still full of some undetermined promise.

In this presentation of futures that promise nothing beyond their possible existence, Beverly Home appears as a political site "outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism," to engage Edelman's polemic with the intention of moving beyond its limit of rejecting "reproductive futurism" (3). Puar usefully critiques Edelman's polemic by redirecting queer opposition away from the heterosexual capacities of reproduction and toward the more flexibly conceived "capacity to regenerate, the terms of which are found in all sorts of registers beyond heteronormative reproduction" (211). These refusals of regeneration are what Johnson's narrator intuitively sets in motion by the story's end. Thinking "better" in Edelman's terms as the promise of "absolutely nothing" the narrator resists recovery, return, redemption, and regeneration by misappropriating his rehabilitation in order to build something else.

Stranger Intimacies: ""Talk into my bullet hole. Tell me I'm fine."

To state the obvious: within these novels, any radical projects of affiliation, attention, care, or domesticity that might emerge do so within prophylactic spaces already equipped to contain, marginalize, and deflate these instances. Yet within these counter-domestic spaces bodies are allowed to—even supposed to—signify in different ways and toward ends beyond the market-based intelligibility of neoliberal capitalism and its supplementary programs and political projects of the 1990s. The germs of possibility for other domestic spaces and of the kinds of subjects such spaces might shelter and invigorate exists in these supplementary groups and spaces as they appear out of something as seemingly prescriptive as the PRWORA, even as that possibility is foreclosed by the normative structures they supplement. These counter-domestic fictions and the

bodily acts and affiliations they animate find their own kinship with more explicitly queer bodies communities. These texts themselves become spaces for different bodily practices and affiliations to emerge, and, perhaps, they even condition the possibility for bodily affiliation and care in ways not already instrumentalized or capitalized by a neoliberal logic of economic competition.[19]

Turning back into the text, I want to offer a closing scene from Johnson's *Jesus' Son*. In the collection's penultimate story, "Steady Hands at Seattle General," the narrator is admitted to the titular hospital and progresses to the point where his hands are steady enough to shave other patients too debilitated by withdrawal to do so for themselves. The story largely takes the form a conversation between Bill (perhaps a wink toward Alcoholic Anonymous) and the narrator. When the narrator asks Bill about his scars from bullet wounds, particularly the two on either side of his face, Bill explains that he has been shot twice: "Once by each wife, for a total of three bullets, making four holes, three in and one out" (108). The alarming obscurity of the domestic violence in this scene, beyond the statistical account of his wounds, offers no details about the nature of this violence; it only suggests Bill's repeated failures at normative domestic life; the institutional space of the hospital is the best home either of these men can make. In the closing lines of the story, they have the following exchange (the narrator begins the passage):

> 'I could see living here two weeks out of every month.'

[19] For more on how care is problematized by contemporary fictions, see Anne Whitehead's "Writing with Care: Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." Whitehead writes that while fictional narratives about providing care are essential in helping us "to relate ourselves to others and to begin to articulate, however tentatively, a language of care; and it can also provide a displaced version of our own social environment that confronts us not only with relations of empathy but also with less comfortable questions of implication and complicity" (64).

'Well I'm older than you are. You can take a couple more rides on this wheel and still get out with all you arms and legs stuck on right. Not me.'

'Hey, you're doing fine.'

'Talk into here.'

'Talk into your bullet hole?'

'Talk into my bullet hole. Tell me I'm fine.' (110-11)

In this remarkable scene, the narrator's ability to touch others where they are most strange and most strained compels him toward reinvigorating unwieldy drives rather than rehabilitating bodies towards normative belonging. The penetration of Bill's body is figured and re-figured in this story: initially as violence, as obvious dysfunction; but it transforms and becomes a surface for synesthetic receptivity. This re-figuration of the bullet wound opens Bill, both literally and figuratively, for an erotic encounter with the narrator (whose name is, after all, "Fuckhead"), first through the careful touching and shaving of Bill's bullet hole, then for the talking into that appears potentially both a kiss and a penetration. Johnson presents this hygienic institutional space as one, in fact, where sexual possibilities emerge as a kind of openness to the stranger. Dean designates such strange and open modes of sexual contact as this as "irreducible to genital contact," and through this notion he develops an ethics of "erotic intimacy that can also serve as a means for encountering something wonderfully strange to the self—something that neither the self nor the other properly possesses but that emerges in the contact between them" (181). Dean insists that what is strange must not be overcome, that it must remain strange and unfamiliar. Going further than Michael Warner's claim that "a public must be more

than a list of one's friends; it must include strangers," Dean makes an obvious point that bears belaboring: "One cannot cruise at home, only in places where one is a stranger" (Warner 74; Dean 184). It is only in the utterly strange intimacy that these men can encounter each other at such a vivid nexus of possibilities. From this mark of harm and point of near penetration, a curious Fuckhead openly ponders openly and optimistically what ruptures, trajectories, ballistics, and lines of flight might appear in the unwieldy aftermath: "When you were shot right through your face like that, did the bullet go on to do anything interesting" (Johnson 107)?

CHAPTER 3

A Workfare Fiction and the Illegitimatizing of Self-Help in Sapphire's *Push* and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*

As a document that leverages myths about family for maximum political gain, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA, discussed in previous chapters) is the culmination of social and political energies that seek to formalize a national invest in the two-parent, Fordist family as perhaps the most obvious and efficient way to inculcate "Personal Responsibility" in American citizens. Yet two of the most successful and controversial novels of the 1990s, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992) and Sapphire's *Push* (1996), narrate precisely the opposite effect: the production of responsible adults in the face of the two-parent family's most catastrophic and pathologized failures, incest and child abuse. In these novels, incest and child abuse appear as the overdetermined images of a number of underlying structural causes, especially poverty and racial inequality. Gillian Harkins argues that in the 1990s, the incest novel, of which she designates both *Bastard out of Carolina* and *Push* as examples, "interrogates the fusion of race, class, and gender commonly covered over by neoliberal idioms of incest, offering potentially radical contributions to the left politics of the period" (11). Building on Harkins's claim, I will argue that the extra-familial communities that appear as ways to address the distinct failures of the nuclear family narrated by Allison's and Sapphire's novels serve as ways of rerouting politically fetishized notions of responsibility, independence, and intimate belonging and care towards ends

incompatible with the late American capitalism and the biopolitical machinations evident in a law like the PRWORA.

In the previous chapter I argued for a notion of counter-domestic fiction that represents and narrates the inherent possibilities for belonging and care appearing in the stranger iterations of domesticity driven by "culture war" inflected policies and practices, especially with regard to the remade welfare policies of the PRWORA and their focus on the American family. I argued that these texts offer unlikely repudiations of the invasive and inadequate domestic interventions both threatened and withheld by so-called neoliberal policy acts, exemplified by the PRWORA. Beyond merely repudiating dominant and politically fetishized notions of domesticity, these texts offer unlikely and illuminating alternatives to the idealized nuclear family model. In this chapter, I want to explore how *Push* and *Bastard out of Carolina,* contrary to texts like *Fight Club, Drugstore Cowboy,* and *Jesus' Son*, suggest that the kind of personal responsibility purportedly elevated by the PRWORA is produced in spite of, rather than because of, the nuclear family. In these texts, however, personal responsibility appears not just as an essential trait of capitalism but also as a product of the collateral traumas that appear in capitalism's wake. Rather than appearing as the idealized trait in a potential laborer, personal responsibility appears in both *Push* and *Bastard out of Carolina* as an unwieldy precursor to feelings of class belonging and the potential for class antagonism that emergent class consciousness entails.

A Workfare Fiction

Sapphire's *Push*—published, coincidentally, in 1996, the same year that Bill Clinton signed the PRWORA into law— must be seen as a politically motivated, sentimental text, but, as I will argue in the coming pages, not in the ways we typically understand these designations. The novel tells the story of Precious Jones, an impoverished, illiterate teenager in New York City who endures multiple, catastrophic failures of the family. *Push* traces Precious's path through various institutional failures, following her out of her abusive childhood home where she has been repeatedly raped and impregnated twice by her mostly absent father while she simultaneously endures physical and emotional abuse from her mother. Precious eventually escapes these confines and is routed through various educational and therapeutic institutions, an alternative school called Each One Teach One and a halfway home called Advancement House. By the novel's close, Precious discovers that she has been infected with HIV by her father, but at this point she has learned how to read and write capably enough that the narrative is told in her voice largely through her journals and letters. These letters and journals serve to simultaneously demonstrate the complex emergence of Precious's literacy and to document the politically supplemented intentional community that replaces the failed families of Precious and the other pupils and the teachers at Each One Teach One. Lee Daniels's Oscar-nominated 2009 film adaptation of the novel, *Precious: Based on the Novel* Push *by Sapphire*, thrust the fictional Precious Jones further and more visibly into real and contentious debates about representations of race, poverty, and disability. While Barbara Bush clamored to celebrate the film as literacy narrative—and

even held a private viewing of it—Ishmael Reed derided it in the pages of the *New York Times* as "psychological assault."[1] One critic simply called the film "poverty porn" (Marble); another called the film "Ghetto tourism" before pejoratively denigrating the film's ability to deal with difficult material because it is merely a "pop-culture commodity" (Hallett). All of this is to say that the film, and the novel that the film title does not allow you to forget, don't seem to be interested in keeping their political interests to themselves.[2] Even Michiko Kakutani's moderately favorable 1996 *New York Times* review of the novel couldn't help but point out that the novel is "disturbing, affecting and manipulative all at the same time." Kakutani goes on to point out that the collection of "Life Stories," written by Precious and her classmates as a kind of postscript to the novel,

> is supposed to mean that Precious has found a community of friends with shared experiences. Instead, they leave the reader with the feeling that one has abruptly left the world of the novel and entered the world of a support group. In trying to open out her heroine's story and turn it into a more general comment on society, Sapphire has made the tale of Precious decidedly less moving than it might have been.

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[1] Bush penned a brief article for *Newsweek* in December 2009 about the private screening she and "George" held in Houston. Bush concludes the article by assigning the film as "homework" to her readers. In a 2010 op-ed for *The New York Times,* Reed seizes on Bush's claim that "There are kids like Precious everywhere" in order to criticize the film's sensationalism, as well as its reliance on caring white characters who appear, in Reed's estimation, as "merciful slave masters." Six days after Reed's letter appeared in the *Times,* Sapphire responded directly to his accusations to argue that these kinds of stories need to be told. She also addresses Reed's excoriation of the film with a similarly charged call "to see black males less defensive and more courageous in their investigations of sexual abuse in the black community."

[2] A few more examples of negative reviews of the film: Anthony Lane's "Making Peace" piece in *The New Yorker* and David Edelstein's review, "When Push Comes to Shove," for *New York Magazine*. Lane, like Ishmael Reed, fails to be adequately self-critical of his own assumptions while examining the film. He begins his review by offensively referring to the film's star, Gabourey Sidibe, as "grimly overweight" actor who "does wonders with that limitation" before moving on to his most damning claim that the movie fails to navigate the "narrow gap between "being genuinely stirred and having your arm twisted."

But to impugn the novel's literary merit and the film's cultural impact based on what appear to be their obvious political and sentimental transparencies is to pluck, rightly or wrongly, low-hanging fruit. [3]

These accusations of a sensationalized, even pornographic interest in poverty and the failure of the family along racial and class lines do mark *Push* as a distinctly sentimental text that illuminates the complicated affective bind in which the novel attempts to ensnare its reader: our readerly sympathy, and whatever class and race identities inflect it, is galvanized by the voice of an angry black woman, as Heather Hillsburg observes. Such contrasts between, for instance, Barbara Bush's sympathy and the image of Precious's angry indignation as it appears on Gabourey Sidabe's face produce, according to Hillsburg, a disruption of "compassion and bring white privilege into sharp relief" (137). Yet even taking Hillsburg's attempted recuperative reading of both the novel and the film into account, Reed's criticism of the film as a failed redemption narrative seems difficult to surmount.[4] Taken strictly as a sentimentalized account of upward mobility, Precious's story does seem to push both obvious racial and class stereotypes and a rather hollow, if not ludicrous, notion of redemption. To wit, Reed writes: "By the movie's end, Precious may be pushing toward literacy. But she is jobless,

[3] Kakutani is right to point out the novel's overtly sentimental aims. In many ways, *Push* is textbook sentimentalism and recalls Jane Tompkins's diagnosis of the genre. Tompkins writes: "the power of a sentimental novel to move its audience depends upon the audience's being in possession of the conceptual categories that constitute character and event. The storehouse of assumptions includes attitudes toward the family and toward social institutions; a definition of power and its relation to individual human feeling; notions of political and social equality; and above all, a set of religious beliefs that organizes and sustains the rest. (126-27).

[4] Reed's objection might be a bit more personal than he lets on: Reed is unsympathetically represented in Precious's story as a member of a "group of black men [who] wanted to stop movie [*The Color Purple*] from book" [Sapphire 83]. This is a reference to Reed's complaints about Alice Walker's portrayal of black men in *The Color Purple*.

saddled with two children, one of whom has Down syndrome, and she's learned that she has AIDS. Some redemption." All of this is to say that a reading of the novel and/or viewing the film that seeks only to identify the text and its production as symptoms of the institutional failures simultaneously precipitated by a racist and insufficient welfare state and emergent neoliberal attempts to replace it with nothing but "personal responsibility" is destined to find that the text, in order to indict the state and local systems that produce inequality, reproduces the racist stereotypes upon which such systems operate.[5]

But what if Reed's take on the redemptive properties of personal responsibility are limited by the political narratives like the PRWORA that insist that personal responsibility leads to jobs and the modes of belonging, like the Fordist family, that depend on those jobs? Reed's critique, which crystallizes the complaints of many other critics of both the film and the novel, assumes that Precious's push towards literacy is obviously categorizable as a story about upward mobility and redemption even when, as Reed notes, notions of upward mobility and, indeed, futurity itself have been utterly cut off for Precious. While Reed is admittedly critiquing the film specifically, his contention about "redemption" seems applicable to both the film and the plot of the novel. Considered alongside Reed's critique of the film's narrative, Kakutani's lukewarm review, which accuses Sapphire of jarring and excessively manipulating readers by asking them to identify with the complex communities that support a traumatized individual rather than the individual herself, inadvertently provides us with a different way of understanding, or

[5] Lisa Duggan is quick to point that terms like these are the euphemistic shorthand of a rhetoric that "promotes the *privatization* of the costs of social reproduction, along with the care of human dependency needs, through *personal responsibility* exercised in the family and in civil society—thus shifting costs from state agencies to individuals and households" (14, emphasis in original).

at least trying to understand, what the book narrates. In this chapter, I will argue for *Push* not as the problematic over-sentimentalized story of redemption that Reed and others suggest the narrative becomes, but instead as a novel that attempts to reroute ideas about personal responsibility and the communities that foster it towards ends that are not calculable under the economic rubrics of neoliberalism that potentially limit the critical horizon. As a novel that, as we will see, explicitly names the shortcomings of workfare policies and the ways these policies mobilize state resources towards producing marketable laborers by propping up the failings of the private family through public supplements, *Push* attempts to reclaim the supplemental and pedagogical communities as modes of care tasked with producing bodies and skillsets that are not easily reducible to strictly economic ends. Because of the first-person, documentary form of Precious's narrative, as well as the poly-vocal "Life Stories" that conclude the text, Sapphire's novel, more so than Daniels's film, is well suited to this task because rather than merely representing Precious's push towards literacy, as the film must, the novel enacts the forms of emergent literacy and the communities it creates in a way irreducible to either a redemptive story about acquiring a job skill or a manipulative ploy for sympathy as a precursor to political awareness. The novel begins to show how literacy programs like Each One Teach One help students take "personal responsibility" for their lives by establishing identities and modes of belonging that exceed the logic of the workfare policies (like those established by the PRWORA) that effectively fund these programs to begin with.

At its core, *Push* is a novel about replacing dysfunctional relationships with functional ones, but the notion of functionality itself comes under some scrutiny in Sapphire's text. Towards the end of the novel, Precious endeavors to steal her file from her counselor at Advancement House in order to glimpse herself through the eyes of the state institutions that "advance" and manage her. Precious discovers that the state views her merely as the potential for cheap labor. The file reads: "In keeping with the new initiative on welfare reform I feel Precious would benefit from any of the various workfare programs in existence" (119). This is a clear critique of the darling of 1990s welfare reforms, workfare (and its buzzwords: self-empowerment and "personal responsibility"). Sapphire even does us the favor of making the counselor a true believer who imagines Precious's exploitation as cheap labor to be a potential boon to Precious herself. But Sapphire takes it even further: Precious uses her emerging literary skills to close read both her file and her interactions with her counselor, seemingly taking literally her teacher's advice that "A good reader is like a detective… looking for clues in the text" (108). Employing these "detective" skills, Precious finds in the file the secret, perhaps even unconscious motivation lurking below the surface of their weekly meetings, namely the production of cheap, replaceable labor. She explains her finding to her classmates, exclaiming, "the counselor at Advancement House pumping me about Mama and Daddy etc, etc, but it's really about workfare" (122). The only functionality Precious's counselor is interested in is her ability, in spite of her traumatic past, to perform labor, potentially at a remarkably discounted rate, as we will soon see in greater detail.

In this scene, Precious glimpses herself through the lens of the PRWORA or the earlier state-level initiatives that finally informed the federal bill ("the new initiative on welfare reform).[6] The complexity of her traumatic familial attachments gets reduced to her suitability for unskilled labor, which somehow appears as both the end (the thing you need personal responsibility for) and the means (a "beneficial" thing that teaches personal responsibility). The problems with workfare policies in New York City in particular have been documented by literacy advocates Emily Hacker and Ira Yankwitt, who note that through certain provisions in PRWORA "Adult literacy programs, many of which have their roots in the social movements for economic justice and educational equality, now find themselves part of the movement to 'end welfare as we know it'" (110). Hacker and Yankwitt go on to note the ways that this has necessarily and fundamentally changed the pedagogical mission of these literacy programs: their federal and state funding became contingent on "curricular shifts… toward content centered on preparing welfare recipients for the workforce. In addition, literacy programs have been required to comply with welfare regulations for limiting time of study and reporting on their students' attendance and job status" (111). Most distressingly, when Hacker and Yankwitt published their article in 1997, New York City had recently laid off municipal workers in order to replace them with 37,000 remarkably low-cost welfare recipients (and more on the way) from the workfare program, essentially swapping out union labor for compelled labor (112).[7]

[6] For more on the evolution of workfare from state-level initiatives to, ultimately, the PRWORA, see Jamie Peck's *Welfare States* (2001).

[7] Hacker and Yankwitt point out: "Workfare offers a partial solution to [New York City's] financial problems by enabling the city to replace higher wage, unionized workers with welfare recipients who earn as little as one-fifth the compensation and receive no benefits or collective bargaining rights. In fact, it costs New York

Following this critique of workfare programs, one struggles to find much redemption in *Push* as a literacy narrative for anyone, let alone someone in Precious's altogether terrible situation as an HIV-positive incest survivor with two children. The grassroots, social justice seeking elements of these programs are catastrophically turned against themselves to produce something that looks remarkably like slave labor rather than personal empowerment.

Literacy, obviously, isn't an undesirable outcome, but the literacy programs, an element in the film Barbara Bush finds so compelling, appear in a more ambivalent light when considered alongside the findings of Hacker and Yankwitt. Gillian Harkins claims that *Push* refuses to determine "whether [Precious's literacy] training is for 'self-empowerment' in neoliberalism, training into workfare, or critical radicalism" (223). This claim accurately describes a one way of framing Precious's own experience with her literacy program, as her counselor's comments about workfare suggest, but it ignores what Each One Teach One produces alongside or in addition to the capacity to perform labor and responsibly hold a job. The "Life Stories" of the Each One Teach One students that appear after Precious's first person narrative serve as evidence that Each One Teach One rehabilitates and educates students towards modes of being and belonging that exceed and even undermine the obvious goals of job training and employment. This collection of autobiographical stories and poems of Precious and her classmates stands as evidence that Each One Teach One cannot be fully contained and routed through the workfare initiatives that presumably fund and utilize the program. The idea that Precious's narrative

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City only 14 percent of the wage of an average full-time clerical worker ($12.32 an hour) to have a welfare recipient in the workfare program perform the same tasks" (114).

and the "Life Stories" that accompany it simply suggest the self-empowerment necessarily appears as a productive failure of the welfare system ignores the fact that these stories are about the ability of the grassroots literacy program to function as a community that produces valuable and potentially even sturdy dependencies (rather than politically venerated independence) and values that are obviously intelligible under the economic rubrics of so-called neoliberalism.

While the "Life Stories" often explicitly proclaim the production of personal responsibility and self-empowerment, as the narrative of the transgender student Jermaine Hicks does when they claim, after enduring a horrific, disfiguring assault at the hands of six men, that "the Bible did not save me. I saved myself. Am still saving myself" (174).[8] This proclamation of personal empowerment subverts the seemingly foundational elements of literacy, charity, and a set of Judeo-Christian values—all gestured towards by the image of the Bible—as mere effects or accompaniments of self-empowerment. Yet Jermaine's claim to self-empowerment comes only after they admit that "I could passed my G.E.D. test months, no a year ago. Ms Rain is upset I won't take it. Taking it will mean I will have to leave the class" (168).[9] Jermaine's dependency on the group suggests that Each One, Teach One fails, in some significant way, to produce independence even as it seems to empower, rehabilitate, and reinvigorate the bodies failed by the familial, educational, and religious institutions upon which the production of "responsible" bodies depends. Jermaine admits that merely moving out of Blue Rain's class to get the G.E.D. as

[8] The "Life Stories" section of the novel contains no page numbers. For simplicity's sake, page numbers referenced here continue the page count of Precious's narrative, which concludes on page 139 of the text.
[9] Sapphire doesn't use pronouns for Jermaine in the novel beyond having Precious, who is initially confused by Jermaine's appearance and name, refer the them as she. I've chosen to rely upon the gender-neutral "they/them/their" while writing about Jermaine in this chapter.

a means to getting a better job— "I want more to life than pushing a mutherfucking broom," they claim— is insufficient motivation, since, as they write, "I know I never woulda wrote this story with those dickheads in [the G.E.D. class]. I never would have stayed" (173). What Each One, Teach One produces, for Jermaine, is a redirection of desire and a rerouting of ideas about upward mobility away from the economically inflected notion that "the good life" is reducible to mere financial independence and its promise of more money and more happiness.

By the end of their story, in fact, Jermaine appears to have entirely rejected any promise of upward mobility and replaced it with the something approximating the "critical radicalism" that Harkins claims the text does not obviously disclose as a possible production of Each One, Teach One. For Jermaine, taking responsibility seems to mean two things. First, they seem to want to be able to tell their story and name their traumas in their own words, even if it means a kind of stasis (staying in the pre-G.E.D. class). Second, Jermaine carries a gun that they have named Mary-Mae after a former lover. Jermaine admits that the "Only time I don't have a gun on me now is when I go to sleep, even then, Mary-May, as I call my rod, is not far away" (174). At the end of their apparent rehabilitation through Each One, Teach One, Jermaine moves towards transgression, or even aggression, rather than compliance, and the image and name of the gun suggest that this transgression is synonymous with the threat of violence. Jermaine is able to blur the lines of what responsibility looks like (self-defense as self-determination) and what sexual and gender identity can be. The gun appears as both feminine ("Mary-Mae") and masculine ("my rod"), and the comfort it provides essentially weaponizes the queer

relationship that initially galvanizes Jermaine towards something like self-determination while it cuts them off from their religious mother. The revelation of the gun serves as a way for Jermaine to punctuate the story without actually ending their own narrative trajectory. The gun and the violence and power it represents, along with Jermaine's newfound ability to self-represent and take control of their own story, empower Jermaine to finally conclude the narrative with this final exclamation: "It's not over yet!" (174).

The indeterminate ending of Jermaine's story, the suggestion that something from their traumatic past remains unsettled even as that trauma has transformed Jermaine, thematically resonates with the final lines of the other students' work included in "Life Stories." Rita Moreno, an ex-prostitute and drug addict, ends her story with an imagined refusal of her future. Rita, whose mother worked, at least sometimes, as a fortune teller before she was murdered by Rita's father, rejects any sense of predetermined fatalism when she imagines her mother refusing to show her what's inside her crystal ball: "She looks at it a long time then say, Ahh Negrita, you don't want to know" (150). Rhonda Patrice Johnson's narrative, which tells her story of homelessness and her rejection by her mother after she is molested by her younger brother, ends with Rhonda meeting Rita, enrolling in Each One Teach One and proclaiming this to be "the end, no the BEGINNING" of her "Life Story" (163). These non-endings, or these refusals of endings, reject the obvious conclusions that we as readers might logically reach, and they place control of the narrative in the hands of the students, even when it seems like the narratives are being driven by larger socio-economic forces. Whatever future might exist for these bodies can potentially be re-written and understood under a different set of values and

norms. By suggesting that a different, unintended set of values can be produced by Each One, Teach One, *Push* becomes a counter-domestic text in ways similar to the texts I examined in the previous chapter. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive,* Lee Edelman writes that "the efficacy of queerness, its real strategic value, lies in its resistance to Symbolic reality that only ever invests in us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in in, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations as reality itself" (18). In other words [paraphrase and connect to your argument]. These "Life Stories" and their endings embrace this notion of queerness as a strategic means to re-write and revalue, but they also reveal deep personal investments by the students of Each One Teach One in themselves, even when any return on this investment, in traditional economic terms, is unlikely. These investments the students appear to make in themselves assume different narrative trajectories for the future, not "no future" but different futures that come with a different set of values and a different set of meanings. The students believe, rightly or wrongly, that their "Life Stories" as they tell them can be significant, and this seems to be the "critical radicalism" that can be inadvertently produced by Each One Teach One as a part of a larger program of workfare reforms.

Sapphire herself, in a response to Ishmael Reed's critique of the *Precious*, attempted to defend her work along the lines that the sharing of these "Life Stories" (which, it should be noted, the film cannot enact or represent in the formal ways the novel does) is the point of her novel. She admits to having "talked to thousands of women who have been abused" since the novel's publication, and she concludes her retort to Reed with an invocation to sharing by insisting that "Silence will not save African-Americans. We've got

to work hard and long, and our work begins by telling our stories out loud and to whoever has the courage to listen." In a sense, Sapphire advocates for her novel, which collects these traumatic "Life Stories," as a kind of counter-archive to laws like the PRWORA and documents like the Moynihan Report, which attempt to control the narrative about the kinds of bodies, abilities, and values welfare in the United States and the families who depend on it should produce. Ann Cvetkovich argues that

> trauma challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive. Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable, and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. (7)

By reading *Push* as an archive that attempts to "call into being collective witnesses and publics," we can begin to see it as a text that invests more in pushing collectivities and communities of care than a text that representing the redemption or rehabilitation of bodies towards potentially exhausted modes of belonging organized under capitalism.

Yet to read *Push* as merely a call to sharing, and to see that sharing as an expression of personal responsibility or self-help, would be to essentially find the novel complicit with what can be seen as neoliberalism's attempts to gut or privatize what remains of the American welfare state. *Push*, however, maintains a more complicated relationship to narratives of self-help, as Jermaine's admission of dependency on Each

One Teach One suggests ("Taking [the G.E.D.] will mean I have to leave the class [168]). Precious and her classmates are actively steered towards obvious iterations of independence, education, and employment, as we see when Blue Rain encourages Precious by telling her that "you could go further than your mother. You could get your G.E.D. And go to college. You could do anything Precious but you gotta believe it" (73). In spite of Blue Rain's encouragement and her apparent willingness to accept images of upward mobility at face value, however, Each One Teach One serves as a state sponsored program that undercuts the so-called neoliberal values of personal responsibility empowering these students to document, in their own words and their own forms, the failures of the nuclear family to produce personal responsibility. More than this, Each One Teach One becomes a community where personal responsibility and self-help take on different meanings and different trajectories. For Precious, self-help takes the form of self representation of her own traumas and her ability to read to her son, Abdul, from the kinds of stories she wants to shape his narrative horizon. "He pulling on my earring," Precious writes of Abdul at the end of her narrative, "want me to stop daydreaming and read him a story before naptime. I do" (140). This fascinating end of Precious's narrative— the words one would typically expect to conclude a marriage plot— suggest a radical revision of how belonging becomes possible. For Rita, perhaps, self-help means refusing the predetermined visions of the future and the obvious trajectories for a recovering addict while simultaneously turning her past traumas into productive fantasies about her mother's fortune telling. For Rhonda, self-help means being able to represent the abuse she suffered at the hands of her brother (who became a dentist) for herself without being limited by that

traumatic narrative ("the end, no the BEGINNING" [162]). For Jermaine, self-help means the ability to actively and even violently transgress gender and sexual norms in order to control their life, which is "not over yet!" (174). These students learn responsibility and take initiative, but not necessarily towards the economically productive (or exploitative) ends problematized by Hacker and Yankwitt.

The question of what ends, ultimately, these students are poised toward by the end of their passage through Each One Teach One does seemingly complicate any claims that can be made about the text's relationship to "redemption" (Reed), or "critical radicalism" (Harkins), but I want to contend that this complication only persists if we ignore that through "Life Stories" the novel becomes a collective narrative rather than just Precious's story. These lives affect, inform, and empower each other beyond the literacy and/or job skills that bring them together. The title page of "Life Stories" names the collection as "Our Class Book," and as such, enacts both a cohesive "we" and a cohesive "class" as a marker of both educational and socio-economic unity. Regardless of the grim prospects of Precious's and the other students' futures, these "Life Stories" do retain their potential for "critical radicalism" through their ability to speak together and in a vocabulary not entirely containable by the world that enabled their individual traumas. Writing of the enabling power of articulating an emergent an inclusive "we," José Esteban Muñoz defines the ability to speak a collectivity as "the field of utopian possibility [as] one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to belonging in collectivity" (20). Muñoz strives to "understand queerness as collectivity," and he suggests, contrary to Edelman's claims in *No Future*, that "queerness is always about futurity and hope. Queerness is always in the

horizon. I contend that if queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be viewed as being visible only in the horizon" (11). These "Life Stories" project queerness onto the horizon by refusing their obvious endings. This is made all the more remarkable when we consider that Sapphire has the audacity to imagine that welfare reforms and workfare programs become this inadvertent enablers of whatever queer futures might appear on the horizon.

"Trash Rises"

From the notions of both queerness and emergent class consciousness, I want to pivot towards Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* as a text that finds distinctly transformative and even counter-domestic possibilities in the fantasies appearing out of the sexually traumatic lives of her characters. Beginning with her 1988 debut collection of short stories, *Trash*, Allison seeks to animate through fiction her own life on the margins, as she says, to "put on the page a third look at what I've seen in life—the condensed and reinvented experience of a cross-eyed working-class lesbian, addicted to violence, language, and hope, who has made the decision to live, is determined to live, on the page and on the street, for me and mine" (*Trash,* 12). Allison reveals here that her ambitious project to represent the experience of different kinds of bodies and their embodied affective circuits—"addicted to violence, language, and hope"—is at its core undertaken as a kind of duty towards those closest to her: "for me and mine." The possessiveness in this passage, the way she collapses bodies and the affective bonds of care and belonging into "mine," seems on its surface an ardent attempt to police the limits of kinship, familial, and domestic belonging, even as systems of kinship and family habitually fail in Allison's

work. Yet the orientation of the phrase towards belonging to each other, rather than merely being family, suggests a horizon of complex affiliation beyond the linear networks of descent and dependency that are easily recognizable under the rubric of the nuclear family. In her statement above, we find a map for Allison's career-long literary project to challenge and recalibrate everyday practices and affiliations using the fantasies and facts that stem from the connected traumas of abuse and working-class poverty.

Like Sapphire's *Push*, Allison's 1992 semi-autobiographical novel *Bastard out of Carolina* seizes on the catastrophic breakdown of the family (again: poverty, incest, and abuse) as a way to show how mythical and unrealistic notions of personal responsibility and self-reliance can appear not just despite family failure but because the family fails. *Bastard Out of Carolina* tells the story of Bone, the "bastard" of the title, and her struggles with poverty and abuse at the hands of her step-father, Daddy Glen. Retrospectively narrated by Bone, the novel's scenes of abuse and impoverished southern life seem to draw on, in Jane Tompkins's words, "the storehouse of assumptions [that] includes attitudes toward the family and toward social institutions … [and] notions of political and social equality" (126-27). As Anjelica Huston's 1996 made-for-television film adaptation makes perhaps overly clear, Allison's novel does, like *Push* and *Precious* do, in some ways approximate the transparent political aims of the sentimental genre, and, indeed, the novel is often understood as a clear call to action to mobilize its readers against domestic violence and crippling poverty.[10] Avoiding the label of sentimentalism but not its political

[10] TNT produced the film, but Ted Turner was uncomfortable with the overt themes of sex and violence, even as Huston's film version excises many of Bone's more complex scenes of masturbation, anger, and violence. The film instead aired on Showtime. The Canadian Maritime Film Classification board initially

aims, Harkins notes that *Bastard Out of Carolina* emerges into new space opened by canon wars of the 1980s as the exemplar of a genre she coins "survivor realism" that describes "texts in which poverty, racism, or sexism is treated as trauma to be overcome by a surviving subject, frequently the protagonist if not the presumptive author of the book itself" (153). Harkins hazards that *Bastard Out of Carolina* might appear as an expedient text to shape public and political efforts to "nationalize the 'minor' family as a cultural formation appropriate to neoliberalism within the United States" because "survivor realism" synthesizes "working class realism and bourgeois family romance" (160). Harkins argues that the hardships produced in "minor" families by racial and class inequalities can be incorporated into larger narratives of national belonging by adopting the form of the "bourgeois family romance." Harkins insists, however, that the incest scenes in Allison's narrative frustrates the potential reappropriation of working class realism in larger national narratives because the incest appears precisely as "the image of class antagonism when it is represented through dominant forms of literary realism" (160).[11] Harkins suggests, persuasively, that class antagonism appears when Daddy Glen molests Bone because in this act he affirms the bourgeois family (Bone is his step-daughter but by molesting her he asserts his patriarchal right to her) while he violates its most sacred rules.[12] In the remaining pages of this chapter, I will suggests that Bone also effects class consciousness and antagonism, though she doesn't do this strictly through the act of incest she suffers.

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banned the film in Canada, but this decision was overturned on appeal. For more on this, see Brendan Kelly's 1997 report in *Variety*.

[11] Harkins argument attempts to correct literary critical attempts to paint incest in contemporary novels as symbolic of larger neoliberal narratives about bodies and desire. For Harkins, this critical movement is exemplified by Katie Roiphe's 1995 article "Making the Incest Scene: In Novel after Novel, Writers Grope for Dark Secrets," published in *Harper's*.

[12] See Harkins's *Everybody's Family Romance,* pages 160-68.

Rather, in her attempts to deal with its traumatic reverberations and the unlikely routes to self-help, personal responsibility, and upward mobility her trauma helps her uncover, Bone establishes modes of minority and class belonging that reclaim the so-called values of neoliberalism as they appear in legislation like the PRWORA, except with a difference and with a different set of trajectories. *Bastard out of Carolina* seems to set itself the difficult task of emphasizing the values of neoliberalism— personal responsibility and upward mobility— while perverting and rerouting these values towards ends other than capitalism's.

As a way of representing Bone's various attempts to cope with her traumas, the novel offers vivid details about her prolific and incestuously inflected masturbation fantasies that threaten to upset easy assumptions about family, sexuality, and what a full and happy life might look like for someone like Bone.[13] Because of this strange confluence of a seemingly clear political project and the graphic and frank depiction it offers of Bone's complex emergent sexuality, the novel has become a popular yet controversial and sometimes banned text for high school classes.[14] Allison herself admits that she "had known what [she] was doing when [she] wrote the novel," but she "had imagined [it]

[13] Ann Cvetkovich offers an exceptionally compelling reading of Bone's masturbation fantasies and "Dorothy Allison's Dream of Fire" in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003). See, in particular, pages 110-17.

[14] The history of *Bastard Out of Carolina* as a banned book (and banned film, see n. 13 above) is particularly intriguing. The most famous instance remains the successful 1995 attempt to remove the novel from the curriculum of Mt. Abram High School in Salem Maine. A Maine supreme court decision upheld the ban; following this decision, Stephen and Tabitha King purchased multiple copies of the novel for every library in the state of Maine. A more recent attempt to ban the novel came in 2008 at Fremont, California's Washington High School. In 2012, in response this ban, local church, Mission Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation, hired Washington High School teacher Teri Hu to lead a community book group reading of Allison's novel and other books banned by the district. For more on the history of *Bastard Out of Carolina* as a banned book, see Allison's 2012 afterward to the novel and Chris De Benedetti's 2012 report on the Mission Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation book club in the *San Jose Mercury News*. Perhaps fittingly, the controversy over the novel itself catalyzes community and civic action that, especially in the Mission Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation, leads to new affective and critical publics.

would be a catalyst for clarity and compassion—not an impetus to anger and repression" (*Bastard* 312-13).[15] The novel contains upsetting subject matter, to be sure, and while the frank depictions of incest and abuse the novel are often pointed to as what makes the novel controversial or, even, potentially transgressive, I will argue that the most radical and transgressive representations at work in this novel are Bone's masturbation fantasies and the way they serve as potent perversions of the self-help narrative the novel takes the shape of.

Indeed, the novel is the most affectively vexing in the moments when Bone's traumas and her fantasies merge, often in startling and seemingly unlikely scenes of masturbation. Bone compulsively returns to her various daydreams and masturbatory fantasies as a way of remaking and reimagining her own body and its possible trajectories and social relations. In one remarkable passage, Bone shamefully—yet also with relish and vivid detail—admits:

> I imagined people watching while Daddy Glen beat me, though only when it was not happening. When he beat me, I screamed and kicked and cried like the baby I was. But sometimes when I was safe and alone, I would imagine the ones who watched. Someone had to watch—some girl I admired who barely knew I existed, some girl from church or from down the street, or one of my cousins or even somebody I had seen on television. Sometimes a whole group of them would be trapped into watching. They couldn't help or get away. They had to watch. In my imagination I was proud and defiant. I'd stare back at him with my teeth set,

[15] These comments come Allison's afterward to the twentieth anniversary edition of the novel (2012: Plume). All citations of *Bastard Out of Carolina* from pages 311-20 are from this afterward.

> making no sound at all, no shameful scream, no begging. Those who watched admired me and hated him. I pictured it that way and I put my hand between my legs. It was scary but it was thrilling too. Those who watched me, loved me. It was as if I was being beaten for them. I was wonderful in their eyes. (112)

This passage, in many ways a riff on Freud's "A Child Is Being Beaten," obviously forecasts the way Bone's narrative and Allison's novel take the private suffering of abuse, rape, and incest into the public sphere.[16] But here Bone also exposes terrifying confines of the legal privacy of the nuclear family home: however horrific Daddy Glen's actions might appear, his claim to legal authority as patriarchal head of household, as Harkins argues, "reveals the patriarchal right entailed in such a role" (166). By fantasizing the private scene of violence into a public spectacle that demands the clear, affective judgment of the public she imagines ("Those who watched admired me and hated him"), Bone authors the most intimate and necessary kind of public intervention that, curiously, does not and cannot offer to rescue her from her trauma but instead marks her as worthy because of it. Remarkably, Bone manages in this passage to transform her "world of shame" stemming from her abuse into a different, more productive and interesting kind of shame when she "pictured it that way and put [her] hand between [her] legs" (113, 112). The masturbatory power of Bone's fantasy multiplies: her imagined self, transformed and even purified by her passive resistance to suffering, becomes her own masturbatory fantasy. Bone's attempt to transform her trauma into something productive in this scene ultimately fails to produce anything more tangible than a sentimental masturbation fantasy that simply reaffirms the

[16] In Freud's "A Child Is Being Beaten," he notes that the fantasy of witnessing a child being beaten "is connected with autoerotic gratification and contains sadistic and masochistic elements of great importance for the later development of character" (405).

bourgeois patriarch and class inequalities that underlie Bone's trauma. By attempting to equate the dignity and humanity conferred to Bone by the viewing public, which does nothing to intervene on her behalf, Bone upholds a system of value and modes of belonging that she will eventually learn to transgress, as we will see in the concluding passage of this chapter.

Bone's fantasies and, as Ann Cvetkovich brilliantly notes, "[t]he pleasure they produce[,] cannot be separated from the trauma to which they are also connected; to ask for one without the other is to demand that Bone tell her story of violence and leave out her fantasies" (103). The jumble of pleasure and trauma allows Bone to complicate the range of affective responses to the text in order to make space for both defiance, emergent possibilities of alliance, and even justice. Bone admits that that "it was only in my fantasies with people watching me that I was able to defy Daddy Glen. Only there where I had any pride. I loved those fantasies even though they were a terrible thing" (113). These fantasies and their appearance as the pathological symptoms of trauma and deviance appear to the contrary as productive projections of strength and, surprisingly, personal satisfaction and public acknowledgment. In *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), Cvetkovich expresses her "hope to seize authority over trauma discourses from medical and scientific discourse in order to place it back in the hands of those who make culture, as well as to forge new models for how affective life can serve as the foundation for public culture" (20). Cvetkovich imagines that trauma itself can be rerouted from a pathology to a "foundation for creating counterpublic spheres" (15). While Bone's imagined audience to the beating isn't quite the potential counterpublic sphere Cvetkovich envisions—

Cvetkovich herself notes that the "price of sexual agency" for Bone is her contention with a pathologized "shamefulness of her beating fantasies" (88)— Bone's emergent ability to conjure and reroute trauma towards productive and imaginative ends suggests that eventually such counterpublics might appear.

Keeping in mind this notion of trauma as a creative possibility rather than as an impediment to a restoration of dignity and justice, I want to trace in this section a strange narrative strain of Bone's story where trash and trauma come together in particularly productive and unexpected ways. This extended passage of the novel involves a terrifying metal hook that Bone and her cousins pull out of the Greenville River that runs past Aunt Raylene's house. The hook, as I will show in the coming pages, serves as a symbol of Bone's ability not transcend or merely overcome her difficulties, but, instead, to rise because of them. The hook allows Bone's trauma to be transformed in images of positive, productive ways other ways of being and being with. Speaking literally of the trash that floats down the river past her house, Raylene explains to Bone that "Trash rises. Out here where no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time" (180). The operative metaphor here is obvious, even if the narrative of what such a "rise" might look like diverges wildly from the traditional upward mobility myths that Raylene's claim indexes. The novel opens on Anney's resistance of the pejorative "trash" and the way she associates that label with the "illegitimate" stamp on Bone's birth certificate. But Bone tells us that while "Mama hated to be called trash," others in her family, namely Bone's grandmother, "said it didn't matter anyhow. Who cared what was written down. Did people ask to read courthouse records?" (3). For many in the family, Granny and Raylene in particular, being "trash"

enables an antagonistic indifference to state attempts to label and discipline bodies. In this way, the ascension made possible by the abjectness of what is "trashy," the river's rising store of garbage, provide a glimpse of what Bone's ultimately transgressive ascension (presumably into a successful lesbian writer named Dorothy Allison) might look like.

Of the trash that rises out of the river near Raylene's house to be discovered by Bone and her cousins, none is more fascinating to the children that the pair of large metal hooks. The purpose and origin of these hooks are never revealed, but they are described and speculated about by the children in nearly sexual language, as Bone's cousin, Grey, exclaims, "My sweet Jesus, look at the size of them… That sucker's longer than my arm" (184). The sensual fascination with the hooks verges into the fantastical as the cousins speculate that the hooks were probably brought down as mountaineering tools by "some Yankee" who "didn't know what our mountains are like" (184). The exotic danger and the possibility that the hooks come to symbolize for the children is a complex tangle of meaning: the hooks are sharp, dangerous, and they hold the threat of future trauma; they are phallic; they are foreign; they are colonial tools of (Yankee) exploration, and, therefore, they have the power to subdue and repress. They also, importantly, literally enable ascent, whatever their original purpose might have been. After the cousins are discovered climbing (and damaging) Raylene's walls with the hooks, she confiscates them for safekeeping. Bone is immediately consumed by the array of now forbidden potential in the hooks. She longs to be near them and hangs around Raylene's place hoping for her chance. When she does, Bone repurposes one of the hooks in wildly unexpected ways, as she recounts:

I took it back to my room, pried the chain off, and cleaned and polished it. When it was shiny and smooth, I got in bed and put it between my legs, pulling it back and forth. It made me shiver and go hot at the same time. I had read in one of the paperbacks Daddy Glen hid in the garage about women who pushed stuff up inside them. I held the chain and thought about that, rubbed it against my skin and hummed to myself. I wasn't like the women in those books, but it felt good to hold that metal, to let those links slip back and forth until they were slippery. I used the lock I had found on the river bank to fasten the chain around my hips. If felt sun-warmed and tingly against my skin, as shiny as the sweat on Uncle Earle's freckled shoulders, as exciting as the burning light behind my eyes. It was mine. It was safe. Every link on that chain was magic in my hand.

I put my head back and smiled. The chain moved under the sheet. I was locked away and safe. What I really was could not be touched. What I really wanted was not yet imagined. Somewhere far away a child was screaming, but right then, it was not me. (193)

This fascinating passage reveals the potential of all kinds of trash to be repurposed for private pleasure and unlikely possibility. Bone gets the idea from Danny Glen's pornography, but Bone reproduces what she finds there with a meaningful, if unnamed, difference ("I wasn't like the women in those books). She also lovingly routs the passage through the body of Uncle Earle, a stereotypically but sympathetically represented "white trash" figure, assuming his masculine body for her own, his shiny sweat for the feel of the metal on her skin. The imaginative and material repurposing of the hook and its chain

transforms Bone in much the same way her fantasy of public abuse does. With the hook, she is safe, and with the hook the future in all its indeterminate promise appears.

This passage is strange and compelling enough as it is, but Allison and Bone are not yet through with the hook; Bone has bigger plans for her prize. Bone's mother, at one point in the novel (96-98), catches her stealing Tootsie Rolls from the Woolworth's; Bone is stung by the embarrassment of the moment, but, in particular, the condescending treatment she and her mother received from the store manager, Tyler Highgarden, had "itched at [her] for years" (222). Bone conceives of a revenge plot that relies the hook as a literal means of ascent to the roof to gain nighttime access to the Woolworth's. With the help of her cousin, Grey, Bone breaks into the store, but once inside, Bone is struck by a particular dissatisfaction with her revenge. She confesses: "I swung my hook back and forth, trying to think what it was that I really wanted, who I really wanted to hurt. My eyes ached and my palms were raw and stinging. I felt like I was going to cry…. and I felt something hard and mean push up the back of my throat" (225). Far from a pang of guilt, Bone is surprised here that the coming to fruition of her revenge fantasy does not resolve her murky feelings of rage, it only subdues them with a heavy ambivalence. The object she might be striking out against—Tyler Highgarden, Danny Glen, her mother—does not appear to her in the Woolworth's, but it doesn't seem clear that this is merely a case of misplaced aggression. More likely, the deep feeling of injustice that inflicts Bone so acutely is too large to be condensed into one figure or one act. As they flee the store, Bone and Grey leave the doors unlocked and yell to "a little group of grey-faced men… all of them looking so much like my uncles" that "The goddamn Woolworth's doors are

standing open. It's open. The whole store is wide open" (226). The men immediately run off to seize their opportunity, and Bone admits "[t]hat was the thing that made me happy, the sound of those boots running down the street and the thought of what all those men would carry home. My ancient outrage at Tyler Highgarden seemed silly compared to that" (226).

Through the open doors of the Woolworth's, Bone's personal struggle synecdochally attaches to a larger, more public class struggle. This opening of the doors for the "little grey-faced men" also familiarizes strangers in intimate ways by deputizing them as uncles. The inactive, imagined public of Bone's earlier child-beating masturbation fantasy becomes real and active. Moreover, the shame Bone felt at her arousal by her own suffering is transformed into pride about the hooks and happiness about the mode of transgressive, even criminal public belonging she creates. Importantly, as Bone's struggle opens and expands to include other bodies, it does not lose the intimate and personally traumatic, transformative elements that make her personal trajectory remarkable and irreducible to purely a problem of class, gender, sexuality, or family.[17] Bone's future remains, as she says when she is with the hook, "not yet imagined" (193). Through the hook and the intimate uses Bone has for it, public class struggle and private family dramas merge in criminal, transgressive, and productive ways. Bone's burglary and the class

[17] See the fourth chapter of Gillian Harkins's *Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America* (2009), "Surviving the Family Romance: Realism and Labor of Incest" (152-87) for her virtuosic reading of incest in *Bastard Out of Carolina* as class antagonism, and Bone's authorial telling of this story as a theft that transgresses the logic of the bourgeois family. Harkins writes a very compelling work of scholarship that is, in more ways than one, particularly germane to my own explorations in this project, as she offers powerful readings of the intersections of labor, class, race, and the logic of the family as identity making categories swirl around, in particular, the neoliberal legislative acts of the 1990s, PRWORA included.

struggle it exposes is eroticized by her previous use of the hook, while her private masturbatory fantasy is retroactively inflected as a radical public struggle. The hook emboldens Bone to both imagine new social (or counter-social) ways of assembling, affiliating, and allying with others, and it quite literally enables her to rise. As she leaves the scene of the crime, she scrapes down the black paint she was horrified to see that her cousin Grey had applied to the hook, hiding its shiny appeal. The fleshy contact between Bone's finger and the metal of the hook maintains and sustains Bone's anger, her indignity. The contact helps her imagine future revenge fantasies. She confesses: "My anger beat inside me. Maybe when the metal was clean and pure and shiny, I would take off one night. Maybe I would go all the way over to Uncle James's house and pull up my Mama a rosebush or two" (226). In this final passage of the scene, the salvaged hook becomes pure possibility that is limited only by Bone's experience and imagination. The hook clearly stands in for Bone's own body as she imagines the possibilities predicated on its return to a "clean, pure and shiny" state. The hook, as an object imbued with Bone's emotional and transformative sexual energies, will enable Bone's flight, and the initial indeterminacy of the Bone's suggestion that "maybe… I would take off one night" contains layers of possibility before being resolved into the (for once) rather tame fantasy of a twelve-year old girl to steal a rosebush for her mother. Before the "maybe" resolves into the over-determined image of the premeditated theft of a rosebush, the clean, shiny, pure hook represents flight, pleasure, and transgression, and, like the Woolworth's robbery, these all appear as things Bone can get away with, even if, by the end of the of the novel, Bone cannot escape with her own mother's affection and allegiance.

In some ways, both *Bastard out of Carolina* and *Push* function as literacy narratives, which describe their characters' passages from unspeakable trauma to self-representation and self-determination. Bone, Precious, and her classmates all learn how to tell their stories in order to assert some manner of control over their chaotic lives lived in abject relation to the national histories that occult their bodies and instrumentalize, exploit, and abuse their bodies in order to uphold flawed systems of social organization under capitalism. Yet these books embody the kind of counter-domesticity I argued for in the previous chapter. By finding in their own versions of personal responsibility and self-help not independence but belonging in collectivity, these characters represent the potential of "critical radicalism" to bring into view a queer utopian horizon, to recall Harkins and Muñoz respectively. As Muñoz notes, "We have never been queer, yet queerness exists as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (1). Each of these characters leaves a record the likes of which they themselves never had the benefit of accessing. By appearing as a kind of counter-archive of radically productive traumas that uses the language and the tropes that condition that trauma— legitimacy, literacy, self-help, and responsibility— these texts repurpose the supplemental modes of belonging and care that are supposed to produce these values towards ends that cannot be easily determined by so-called neoliberal logic.

CHAPTER 4

It Takes an Archive: Reimagining Belonging in Helen DeWitt's *The Last Samurai*

"The horizons of the contemporary village," Hillary Clinton writes in *It Takes a Village* (1996), "extend well beyond the town line. From the moment we are born we are exposed to vast numbers of people and influences through radio, television, books, movies, computers, compact disks, cellular phones and fax machines. Technology connects us to the impersonal global village it has created" (13). Clinton claims that even though "The village can no longer be defined as a place on the map, or a list of people or organizations… its essence remains the same: it is a network of values and relationships that support and affect our lives" (13). While Clinton's vision of a technologically connected "global village" smacks of the neoliberalism that haunted her candidacy in the 2016 Presidential election, the language in the passage also suggests a certain willingness on Clinton's part to move beyond 1990's political anxieties about the perceived precarity of the nuclear family. Rather than earnestly considering socializing childcare, Clinton essentially argues for a version of communal childcare based on emergent technology and good old-fashioned personal responsibility, a combination which would, ostensibly, further privatize childcare and allow the state to shed further responsibilities for the bodies of its youngest citizens. In spite of this, *It Takes a Village* can still be read as a sort of political counterweight to The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) and its claims that marriage and the two-parent

family are essential elements of "a successful nation," though, ironically, Clinton campaigned for the PRWORA as First Lady.[1] While the PRWORA clings to the two-parent nuclear family model as a key to national success, Clinton's book takes up an important question that the PRWORA does not or cannot ask, a question at the core of the counter-domestic texts I've identified in previous chapters: how can the American family, as an unavoidably central unit of the American state and economy, change along with (or perhaps even in opposition to) the state and the economy it is foundational to? Clinton's strange invocation of technology and the informational archives and objects to which it connects us serve as an intriguing ways to consider how contemporary modes of domesticity, intimacy, and care can exceed the nuclear family model and, potentially, produce different kinds of subjects and values.

Consider alongside Clinton's quotation above A.S. Byatt's claim that Helen DeWitt's 2000 novel *The Last Samurai* is "multilingual, multistoried, myriad-minded—a novel of the Internet age where everyone has access to all grammars, all dictionaries, all information, where math and physics and philosophy and fairy tales all hum across the same screen." DeWitt's novel, which tells the story of a young, expat American woman named Sibylla Newman (more on that name to follow) and her journey from an idiosyncratic and enthusiastic classics scholar toiling in the archives of Oxford to disillusioned single-mother living in London on an insufficient wage. Sibylla commits

[1] The Atlantic, in a 2016 Bruce Covert article titled "Why Hillary Clinton Has Never Apologized for Welfare Reform," went as far to claim that Clinton's support of the PRWORA "was a crucial turning point in her career. It was when she transformed into the politician she is today." The suggestion here, of course, is that choosing to support the PRWORA represents the pivotal moment when Clinton committed to neoliberalism at the expense of the women and families she claimed to hold at the center of her political agenda.

herself to keeping secret from her son, Ludo, a remarkably precocious linguistic prodigy, the identity of his father, a kitschy (and therefore unsuitable) travel writer named Val Peters who Sibylla will only ever refers to, on account of the kitschiness, as Liberace. Sibylla never reveals Ludo's existence to Val Peters. In the absence of a suitable father figure for her son, Sibylla decides to repeatedly show him Akira Kurosawa's classic film, *The Seven Samurai,* while she does the menial, alienating labor of digitizing the archives of increasingly ridiculously titled hobby magazines. The novel then turns to the brilliant young Ludo, who, informed by the recruitment scenes in *The Seven Samurai,* decides there is no reason he should not pick and choose a father for himself. The novel's final sections feature Ludo's narration of his various attempts to trick some of the prominent scholars, adventurers, con-men, and artists of London into serving as his father. Ludo manages to identify all of these men, in one way or another, through the various archival spaces of London, including its libraries, bookstores, art galleries, and newspapers. In this chapter I will argue that DeWitt's novel, which explicitly thematizes the archives in order to trouble and then reimagine their relationship to kinship, endeavors to answer the questions *It Takes a Village* raise about how the family can necessarily be transformed as an engine of subject production. *The Last Samurai,* I contend, shows how the sedimented knowledge, narratives, and modes of belonging inherent in and authorized by the archives can be transformed by Sibylla's and Ludo's increasingly queer practices of archival engagement as they are represented in the novel. In doing so, Sibylla and Ludo engage the archives to create different modes of intimate belonging and care. In addition to offering an extended reading of DeWitt's novel, which, in spite of its cult-like popularity among

literary journalists, has been largely ignored by academic literary criticism, I will consider *The Last Samurai*'s representations of queer archival practices alongside Jacques Derrida's, Ann Cvetkovich's, and Anjali Arondekar's critical work on concepts of the archives.[2]

Hillary Clinton and the Global Village

Much has been made of the ham-fisted nostalgia for family values and optimism about the growing global technocracy of the 1990s found in *In Takes a Village*. If we consider the book alongside Clinton's concurrent and seemingly antithetical support of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), we can see the treatise as part of Clinton's persistent struggle against her characterization as neoliberal. Against the PRWORA's finding that the family is the foundational unit of a successful society, Clinton's claim that "it takes a village" takes on a number of very complicated and conflicted valences. As I argued in the second and third chapters of this dissertation, the PRWORA is itself a messy collection of conflicted logics that attempt to both mark out the privileged territory of the two-parent family in American life and also potentially (and unintentionally) invigorate grassroots, communal care-giving alternatives to the nuclear family. What Clinton got undeniably right in her 1996 book, however, and perhaps what is not openly acknowledged by the text of the PRWORA, is that the

[2] The only peer-reviewed academic articles to examine *The Last Samurai* look at the novel as a part of contemporary trends in literary subject matter: Caroline Marie's and Christine Reggiani's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Mathematician" (2007) reads the novel as part of set of novels about math prodigies while Petrus Van Ewijk's "Encyclopedia, Network, Hypertext, Database: The Continuing Relevance of *Encyclopedic Narrative* and *Encyclopedic Novel* as Generic Designations" (2011) examines the novel's participation in the encyclopedic genre. Literary journalism, on the other hand, has treated the novel with quite a bit of enthusiasm. In addition to *The New York Times* review and *The Paris Review* articles already cited, DeWitt's initial debut or its 2016 reissue saw articles or reviews by A.S. Byatt in *The New Yorker* (2000), Daniel Mendelsohn in *The New York Review of Books* (2000), and Lindsay Gail Gibson in *The Los Angeles Review of Books* (2016). And even these are just a selection giving evidence to a broad journalistic obsession with DeWitt's eccentric debut offering.

technocratic, neoliberal world of the 1990s (and beyond), where dual-parent households are less necessary than dual-earner households, stands at odds with so-called conservative family values and nuclear family structure.[3] But Clinton wasn't content to simply point this out. Even as she exposed the practical impossibilities of maintaining the nostalgic ideal of the nuclear family of the 1950s with claims like "Even if golden age had existed, we could not simply graft it onto today's busier, more impersonal and complicated world," she clung to another overly-idealized hobby-horse of the American political imaginary, personal responsibility (14). Indulging her own nostalgia, Clinton wrote that "Creating [a] consensus in democracy depends on" among other things, "balancing individual rights and freedoms with personal responsibility and mutual obligation" (15). By invoking the "village," Clinton attempts to distinguish the village from the state by making the village appear in the above passages as a soft conglomerate of private interests and actors where obligation is recast as a private, personal responsibility rather than a public one. With the iconic "village," Clinton harmonized her seemingly opposed political views about the family and society, and, in doing so she unambiguously defined herself as a central, if not the central, figure for so-called neoliberal politics in the United States. The ostensibly privatized village that aggregates and animates mutual *personal* responsibility and obligation in Clinton's book is the aspiration of the neoliberal state.

[3] There was a fierce but expected conservative push-back to Clinton's claim that sought to reassert the nostalgic ideal the nuclear family in American private and political life. Bob Dole proclaimed at the 1996 Republican National Convention that "with all due respect… it does not take a village to raise [sic] a child. It takes a family to raise [sic] a child." Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum writing, nine years later, a 2005 book pointedly titled *It Takes a Family*. For more on the unlikely neoliberal-neoconservative consensus about the challenges facing the nuclear or Fordist family after 1970, see Melinda Cooper's *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (2017).

Clinton's treatise on the family, however flawed, lays out an archival methodology for the production of citizens by the family/village. Clinton seems to advocate, or at least to describe as aspirational, a method of supplementation and deputization wherein a family or a village is forced to use, unapologetically, any and every tool at its disposal. The method of using things that don't initially seem like parts of the family to reaffirm the family mirrors the main funding mechanisms in the PRWORA: namely, that state administered welfare programs can take nearly any form but must be shown to foster and produce, in some way, two-parent families. If Clinton claims that it takes a village to make a child, and the PRWORA proclaims that civil society must do all it can to prop up the two-parent family that is the foundation of a successful nation, these two seemingly opposed accounts of social, economic, and ideological reproduction can actually be seen as two sides of the same coin: families produce responsible individuals who form a civic society; in turn, civic society permeates and supplements families to ensure an ideologically compatible versions of civic society and responsible individualism.[4] Clinton enlists everything she can to aid in this production of individuals: people, yes, but also "radio, television, movies, computers, compact disks, cellular phones, and fax machines." Because these technologies provide access to collections of knowledge and cultural objects which sediment and transmit the inhered cultural values subtending global capitalism, all of these elements of the village hum with the "impersonal" potential to produce a subject and, presumably, an attendant ideology of, personal responsibility,

[4] This is not a novel take on the role of the family, which has long been figured in American politics as a foundational unit of the nation-state. John D'Emilio and Eli Zaretsky, among others, note that the family holds a conflicted relationship to capitalism. While capitalism obviates the family's role as an economic unit, it depends on the family to perform both ideological and physical reproduction of the labor force. For more on this critical genealogy, see the introduction to this dissertation.

which Clinton holds so dear. But what kind of hybridized, "impersonal" techno-subject might this network produce? And is it inevitable that neoliberal and capitalist ideologies will emerge from this contemporary techno-village linked in previously unimaginable ways to the collected cultural objects and knowledge? What models for family and personal care does this global village portend? Is the technocratic citizen produced by global capitalism necessarily of global capitalism? I'm interested in pursuing some image of what Clinton's communal logic of subject production and care could be if it were uncoupled from the so-called neoliberal systems that necessitate such a logic in the first place. Yes, Clinton's global village contains and produces us, but might it also rupture or undo the logics of that production?

The Last Samurai, I contend, sets about answering the question posed by *It Takes a Village* by considering the ways that DeWitt's protagonists look to archives (like the Oxford University Library) and collections of cultural objects (like Blockbuster Video, art galleries, records stores, and Sibylla's personal library) in order to uncover alternatives to the two-parent family. Pierre Bourdieu notes the curious relationship between archives and the daily practice of kinship, observing: "the logical relationships constructed by the anthropologist are opposed to 'practical' relationships— 'practical' because continually practiced, kept up, cultivated— in the same way the geometrical space of the map, an imaginary representation of all theoretically possible roads and routes is opposed to the network of beaten tracks, of paths made ever more practicable by constant use" (37). Bourdieu's metaphor suggests that logical relationships between bodies, such as the sharing of genetic material between a father and a son, is sedimented and authorized by

archival genealogical records of descent and narrative accounts of how this relationship (among others) might normally theoretically (rather than practically) proceed. Bourdieu shows that practical kinship, as opposed to kinship theory, might disclose possible modes of belonging and relationality. *The Last Samurai*, on the other hand, suggests that objects and narratives within the archive can be assembled, taken up, and reappropriated in excess of both practical and theoretical kinship. The objects to which the archives allow access, most obviously a videocassette of Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* that Sibylla believes can serve as Ludo's father, help Ludo and Sibylla see possible routes on Bourdieu's metaphorical map that should, by existing logic, be impassible. In the archives, Ludo and Sibylla take up objects and narratives in unsanctioned ways that help them forge a logic of familial belonging and produce new relationships that produce and support different sets of ideologies than the ones so valued by so-called neoliberalism. *The Last Samurai* offers us, I argue, usefully productive version of Clinton's village, where unwieldy archival engagements exceed and escape—if escape is possible—the boundaries belonging established by the archives in order to animate ethical practices of intimacy and care for others that are not easily contained by notions of the family, nuclear and otherwise, as an ideological engine of capitalism.

Turning from Clinton to *The Last Samurai,* I want to pursue a fairly simple question: as a novel about, among other things, radically reorganizing ideas about subject production, language, and cultural and linguistic archives, what conclusions can DeWitt's animation of Clinton's claim that "it takes a village" help us reach regarding the production of subjects under so-called neoliberal capitalism? How can different kinds of

subjects and different kinds of intimate networks emerge from the most quotidian and commonplace situations? In the section that follows, I will examine how DeWitt's novel critically repurposes our cultural and archival practices as they pertain to modalities of parental and familial care towards different, unwieldy ends. By examining Clinton's folksy attempt to graft "values and relationships" of intimate and interpersonal care onto larger global-economic webs communication technology, the text can be seen as strangely similar to *The Last Samurai* in the way it energizes unexpected grassroots heuristics for remaking familial and care-based networks. While the book, considered alongside Clinton's support for the PRWORA, illuminates conflicts in her political positions and commitments, it also clearly poses practical problems facing the American family—especially with regard to childcare—at the end of the twentieth century. DeWitt's novel suggests, like the other texts I have treated in this dissertation, that the supplementary elements—videos, books, museums, to name a few—offer alternatives to the established nuclear familial relationships privileged by the capitalistic politics of the late-twentieth century. More than this, though, these supplementals threaten to produce a subject who conceptualizes "responsibility," as we will see, in ways that repudiate the neoliberal economy so reliant on the ideological production of "personal responsibility." *The Last Samurai* offers a critical account of the production, maintenance and control of these archives, speculates what might happen if, guided by an extensive course of study across western academic disciplines, a parent really did let a videocassette take care of a child's emotional needs?

Reading DeWitt's novel as a response to Clinton, reveals a playful (Ludo, is, after all, the name of one of her protagonists) project of archival repurposing that gives us new ways of thinking subjectivity and its production in relation to the existing social order of global capitalism. DeWitt's novel offers us a way to speculate on Clinton's titular claim without the attendant baggage of her maligned attachments to global finance and neoliberal dogmas (workfare, personal responsibility, privatization) that serve as the foundation for the PRWORA. DeWitt's novel asks us to think about the village and all its attendant parts and institutions (the university, the public common spaces, the global influences and the economic struggle that abject the most vulnerable and exposed bodies) and to think about what new ways of life might emerge from London as a collection of applied knowledge and the survival strategies built upon them. The governing logic, it would seem, of Sibylla's parenting style, comes from a passage she excerpts from Arnold Schoenberg's 1911 work of musical theory *Harmonielerhe*. Schoenberg's text claims that the evolution of western music is organic. That sound and the human capacity to hear it contain within themselves the necessary capacities to change in revolutionary ways. He writes:

> It is clear that, just as the overtones led to the 12-part division of the simplest consonance, the octave, so they will eventually bring about the further differentiation of this interval. To future generations music like ours will seem incomplete, since it has not yet fully exploited everything latent in sound, just as a sort of music that did not differentiate within the octave would seem incomplete to us. (62)

Schoenberg goes on to claim that this evolution is logical and inevitably but it will not be brought about by "reasoning (aus Gründen) but from elemental sources (Ursachen); it will not come from without, but from within. It will come from imitation of some prototype, and not as technical accomplishment" (62).

Under Schoenberg's rubric, Sibylla considers the book—an object built out of language(s), narrative tropes, and established genres—as also ripe for this inherent capacity for transformation. Sibylla believes that the future of the book lies in its ability to assemble disparate languages and sounds in relationship to each other so that, eventually, she might write book in which she "would hear languages related like a circle of fifths, [she] would see languages with shades of each other, like the clouds of Cézanne" (65). This passage also serves as an obvious frame of reference through which to glimpse the aspirations of *The Last Samurai*. Sibylla claims to "hear in my mind snatches of books that might exist in three or four hundred years" that would utilize multiple languages, grammars, and sets of myth (65). The affinity Sibylla feels with Schoenberg's theory of the evolution of music—beyond just offering her hope for the book as form—becomes her distinct theoretical approach towards all manner of cultural production and, shockingly, the material and ideological reproduction of humans. Sibylla wants to remain open to the possibility that latent and perhaps imperceptible elements of our current world can uncover hidden possibilities for the future. Schoenberg's argument about music becomes *The Last Samurai*'s argument about cultural, social, and ideological reproduction: archives of sedimented knowledge necessarily undermine and transform themselves from within, even against the conservatism and conservationism that is their very purpose. The novel

seems to claim, as Derrida does, that "Every archive is at once *institutive* and *conservative*. Revolutionary and traditional" (7, emphasis in original).

Queerness and the Archives

Archives abound in *The Last Samurai*. The formal conceit of the novel, considered alongside the Schoenberg passage above, demands that the novel itself be taken up as archive, as a bundle of multi-generational accounts of Sibylla's and Ludo's family history. The novel collects and collates a linked set of documents and narratives, including Sibylla's account of her parents' lives; her firsthand account of her own failed scholarship at Oxford; the conception and birth of Ludo; her subsequent efforts to single-parent Ludo while she keeps the identity of his father from him and supports herself by doing tortuous data-entry work as part of the creation of a digital archive of innocuous periodicals; and, finally, Ludo's firsthand accounts of his various attempts, guided by the recruitment scenes in Kurosawa's film, to identify and recruit a suitable father figure for himself. In the process of narrating his recruitment process, Ludo also collects and perpetuates the histories, myths, and objects that accrue around each potential father figure, some "great men," others, to their credit, less "great." Other archives of all sorts also populate the novel, from Sibylla's own idiosyncratic and carefully curated book collection (constantly expanding despite her economic precarity), to the Oxford library, to the Blockbuster Video where Ludo will look for unlikely parental guidance and for solutions to the problems he faces. The universities, libraries, book stores, art galleries and studios, record stores and video rental shops that populate London suggest that the city itself appears as a collection of archives in which Ludo and Sibylla sift through extensive languages, logics, narratives,

and images to redefine, in unconventional, antagonistic ways, their relationships to socio-economic and national relations foisted upon them at birth.

For Sibylla, though, the pervasiveness of archives offers as much menace as comfort. In the novel's opening pages, Sibylla describes the Library at Alexandria in downright corporate terms as "built up through an acquisitions policy of singleminded ruthlessness" (20). The singleminded ruthlessness that inheres in the very nature of the archive weighs heavily on Sibylla's mind as she undertakes the utterly mindless and brutal job of digitizing back issues of seemingly worthless magazines with absurd titles like "*Carpworld*." The tortuous physical work of the digitalization of the archive, work that Sibylla notably does from home, means that the power that once emanated from walls of Alexandria has been entirely etherealized and domesticated. The archive—about which Derrida claimed there is only one real question: "where does [its] outside commence?" (8)—powerfully imposes its "singleminded ruthlessness" of acquisition on Sibylla's time and her relationship to Ludo. By moving the "ruthlessness" of the archive and the labor it demands into the home, *The Last Samurai* literalizes the ways that capitalism colonizes Sibylla's intimate relationship to Ludo. Sibylla's roles as mother and bread winner are disciplined by the inhered and authorized obligations (legal, emotional, and financial) of the mother-child relationship.

Sibylla left Oxford in part because she could not shake the notion that archival scholarship is a simultaneously conservative, prophylactic and incestuous activity that nonetheless reproduces the restrictive limits of law and culture. She explains that

> There are people who think contraception is immoral because the object of copulation is procreation. In a similar way there are people who think the only reason to read a book is to write a book; people should call up books from the dust and the dark and write thousands of words to be sent down to the dust and the dark which can be called up so that other people can send further thousands of words to join then in the dust and the dark. (19)

By staging her aversion to a certain kind of reproductive archival engagement, however, Sibylla implies that the archive can and should be put to different uses other than the academic and cultural labor of policing and keeping pure its own extensive body. More than just echoing Ezra Pound's famous literary dictate to make it new, Sibylla's likening of non-reproductive copulation with unauthorized archival practices eroticizes the relationship between a unruly researcher and her objects of study. The eroticization of bodies, objects, and the non-reproductive—or differently reproductive—process by which they engage marks Sibylla as a potentially queer body at play in heart of the archive as a normalizing institution. Elizabeth Freeman proposes the possibility for queerness to appear in bodies at work rather than bodies at play when, in *Time Binds,* she states that her aim is to "restore a differently queer body to queer theory—the body erotic thought not only in terms of its possibilities for making sexual cultures but in terms of its capacities for labor—by which I mean both the social relations of production/reproduction and the expenditure of bodily energy." (*Time Binds* 18). Freeman deftly transfers queerness from marking a refusal of reproduction to marking a distinctly unwieldy kind of production. And, indeed, Sibylla's queer labor in the archives becomes even queerer as she transforms her process

of unwieldy and playful archival engagement into her own peculiar brand of unpaid parental labor. Freeman, writing elsewhere about modes of queer kinship, offers a way of seeing how such queer labor can be extended has suggested it could appear as a queer "technique of renewal": a practice of kinship that "recreates and recharges bodies toward ends other than labor, such as play, love, and even violence" ("Queer Belongings" 298). The image of the nuclear family in particular gathers legitimacy from the archives, be they public records (birth certificates), fictional narratives (domestic novels, for instance), or laws or political discourse explaining its value and its ramifications (the PRWORA, The Moynihan Report). "Play, love, and even violence" as methods of archival engagement necessarily refuse to consign texts to the "dust and the dark" of the hidden subterranean structure that almost passively emanates and succumbs to the archive's power. Sibylla longs to appropriate the archival texts in excess of the accepted socio-political limits cultural production and interpretation projected by sanctioned encounters with the texts themselves.

Sibylla's rejection of what Derrida names the "patriarchival" logic of the academy/archive recalls and recasts Virginia Woolf's imaginary encounter with the Oxbridge library in *A Room of One's Own*.[5] After being denied entrance to the library because she is a woman, Woolf's persona proclaims

> That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library. Venerable and calm, with all its treasures safe locked within its breast, it sleeps complacently and will, so far as I am concerned,

[5] Derrida claims that in the logic of "the patriarchive," "there is no power without control of the archive, if not memory" (4 n. 1).

so sleep for ever. Never will I wake those echoes, never will I ask for that hospitality again, I vowed as I descended in anger." (9)

The problem, in Woolf's account, isn't with the textual contents of the archive; rather, the trouble comes from the management and maintenance of the sacred body of texts and their sanctioned uses. Sibylla has gained access where Woolf's personae failed, but Sibylla still, at the end of the twentieth century, can't do what she wants with the texts—she cannot even discern what she wants to do with them because the generative possibilities of coupling with, using, repurposing the texts is still emergent and indeterminate. To imagine that Sibylla desires the texts for some manner of non-reproductive enjoyment is no stretch. By desiring this non-reproductive enjoyment as a kind of queer erotics of knowledge—by loving old objects in new and unsanctioned ways—Sibylla can uncover novel ways of knowing and emergent modes of intellectual pleasure that resist the foundational logic of the archive and the modes of life, affiliation, and love built out of it. Sibylla hopes for, perhaps, a more capacious and affirming hospitality than Woolf's staid Oxbridge version, one that countenances curiosity, play, pleasure, and experimentation towards indeterminate desires and urges. To open the archive to uses that do not reproduce it or that reproduce it with a difference is to threaten the socio-political structures that found and sustain their authority through the archive.

With Sibylla and Ludo and the unlikely uses they find for videos, narratives, and the would-be archival objects Ludo acquires (a valuable piece of art, a piano recording) we will begin to glimpse the emerging horizons of their archival play. But before moving further into *The Last Samurai,* I want to consider briefly the relationships between archives

and queer theory. To do this, I want first to consider Derrida's designation of the archive as a logic rather than a materially defined space before situating the work of Ann Cvetkovich and Anjali Arondekar alongside Derrida's deconstruction of the archive. I aim to demonstrate how DeWitt's text adds to, in creative and productive ways, more obvious queer theoretical accounts of queer archives and queer archival practices.

Derrida, as noted above, understands the character of the archive as fundamentally self-conflicted, at once "revolutionary and traditional" (7). The archive entrenches and preserves established modalities of life, law, and knowledge while it simultaneously authorizes emergent ones. Because of this, Derrida defines the archive as a logical process rather than a fully actualized entity. These opposed natures, radical and conservative, position the archive as logic in a curious relationship to queerness. For queer theory, Derrida's claim that archives are always, even in their most "*institutive*" iterations, conceived of as a process of authorization poses a problem that needs to be addressed: between the normalizing power of archives as institutions and the power they can grant insurgent movements, what role can queerness—understood broadly as an active refusal of normalizing socio-political forces surrounding sexual, gender, and other intimate bodily relations—play in the archive?[6]

To parse this question, I want to consider possible relationships between queer life and the archive as they appear in the work of Cvetkovich and Arondekar. The grassroots archives and the practical activism they enable, highlighted by Cvetkovich's *An Archive of*

[6] The question of whether or not queerness can properly be affixed to an archive's normalizing functions is related, it seems, to the questions Judith Butler, among many others, raises about gay marriage and kinship in general. Butler troubles the normalizing functions of marriage and kinship in order to highlight the other queerer modes of affiliation and intimacy that they exclude. For a deeper account, see Butler's "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?"

Feelings, work towards preserving queer narratives, modes of life, and practices of affiliation while moving trauma, its traces, and the creative processes it catalyzes beyond a frame of legibility that marks trauma as pathological. Cvetkovich names as "queer archives" collections of photographs, narratives, recordings, and documentary films. These "queer archives," she argues, "can be viewed as the material instantiation of Derrida's deconstructed archive; they are composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history and understand the quest for history as a psychic need rather than a science" (254). By designating certain archives as queer, Cvetkovich demonstrates the self-deconstructing logic Derrida assigns to the archive, but by claiming that archives can be assembled under the banner of queerness—that queer archives can perform as an archive the legitimization, conservation, and ostensible normalization of the material practices that constitute them—isn't Cvetkovich obviating queerness itself? Cvetkovich's project traces how these queer archives authorize in beautifully generative ways alternative re-figurations of trauma, and it does so in the useful and practical terms of the real activism on behalf of bodies at risk. The "grassroots lesbian archives" Cvetkovich treats form, to some extent, the external limits of "institutional forms of cultural memory," but the desired outcome is not the formation of a limit that institutional memory cannot breach, but instead the reinscription of memories of depathologized trauma and new practices of mourning within the limits of a more properly institutional memory (255).[7]

Cvetkovich may have, arguably, institutionalized these queer collections with the publication of her book: the grassroots movements, narrative practices, and images of

[7] Cvetkovich engages Derrida's Archive Fever directly, though interestingly not his claim that archives are both "conservative and institutive." For a full account of Cvetkovich on Derrida, see pages 253-257 of Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Culture.

those marked by childhood abuse, AIDS, and other traumas that historically accompany queer life reproduced between the covers of *An Archive of Feelings* make their way into spaces of institutional memory in university libraries and academic databases. While it is true that the movement of these queer representations of trauma from occluded to visible doesn't completely revise dominant representations of trauma—clearly trauma continues to mark bodies as pathological, and institutional archives are big enough to hide in—it seems necessary to ask: What happens to queerness when its archives are doubly enclosed, first by the institutional logic of the urge to archive and then subsequently by their movement into the more properly "institutional forms of memory" that mark them as queer? Is queerness undone by attempts to archive it? How and where can queerness persist in an archive?

To this end, Anjali Arondekar begins her extended examination of sexuality in colonial archives in India, *For the Record* (2010), by cautioning that "Often robbed of historical specificity, the coupling of *archive* with minoritized knowledge formations—such as *queer, postcolonial,* and *feminist* in particular—has inevitably led to some simplistic and triumphant forms of empiricism" (2). By invoking Arondekar's warning here I certainly don't want to suggest that Cvetkovich's vibrant, historically specific, nuanced work documenting and theorizing occluded conceptions of trauma is guilty of such empirical simplicity. "Queer archive" appears as a necessary heuristic in Cvetkovich's work, and we see as much when Cvetkovich productively discusses it alongside Derrida's deconstruction of the archive. What I do want to focus on, however, are the ways Arondekar understands methods of queer representations of "minoritized knowledge

formation" persisting within institutional archives rather than from beyond them or as counter to them. Arondekar opens her book with a necessary set of questions: "Why does sexuality (still) seek its truth in the historical archive? What are the spatial and temporal logics that compel such a return? And conversely, what kind of archive does such a recuperative hermeneutics produce?" (1). To answer these questions, Arondekar cannot simply find a new set of objects assembled as counter-archive. As a method, Arondekar posits

> a reading practice that redirects attention from the frenzied "finding" of new archival sources to an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible (and desirable) through the very idiom of the archive. Such an archival turn, I will demonstrate, mandates a theory of reading that moves away not from the nature of the object, but from the notion of an object that would somehow lead to a formulation of subjectivity: the presumption that if a body is found, then a subject can be recovered. (3)

By approaching an archive in this manner, Arondekar undermines an archive's power to normalize and legislate possibilities for subjectivities and identities; at the same time, she acknowledges that an archive obscurely memorializes more bodily dispositions and acts than can be seen on first, second, or even third glance. For Arondekar these "(new) reading practices emerge not against the grain of archival work, but instead from within the archive's productions," and they do so not to identify traces of lost objects but in order to attend to what she calls "subject effects sedimented through the enactments of disciplinary discourses" (5/4).

The emergence of homosexuality in the colonial archive comes from within the archive's objects, its contortions, and its attempts to conceal. It is through concealment, evasion, and marginality, Arondekar argues, that homosexuality comes to sit at the center of the colonial archive itself. Queerness is coaxed out via a practice of reading sanctioned objects against the grain. While Cvetkovich argues that queerness opposes itself to the archive as counter-archive, even as it adopts its underlying logic in order to make space for the productive and creative act of mourning and responses to trauma, Arondekar makes a claim that queerness hides in the margins and gaps of the archive, constituting what she calls "an open secret," in order to recover lost bodies. By placing *The Last Samurai* alongside Cvetkovich's and Arondekar's work on queerness in the archive, I aim to show that DeWitt conceives of ways queerness that can exist in the archive as a practice of knowledge production (for Sibylla) and then a practice of artistic or cultural production (for Ludo) rather than as an definitional principle among objects or as set occulted bodies or practices in need of restoration. A body animated by a commitment to queer labor and queer production, to recall Freeman, creates epistemological ruptures and practical trajectories that do more than simply reproduce. DeWitt seems less interested in the objects and traces of bodies one finds in the archives than in how these objects, traces, and practices can be used, or, better yet, how theses objects can be played with in order to produce new modes of relationality and cultural practices of belonging that appear from within the archive but not of it. Sibylla's archival practices have the potential to produce rather than reproduce.

All These Fragments: Hospitality and the Broken Home

While Sibylla offers a number of intriguing critical takes on archives and their uses, it is her use of *The Seven Samurai* as a suitable substitute father-figure for Ludo that perhaps best illustrates the possibilities and the limits of her strange use of archival objects. On the one hand, Sibylla's finds it entirely reasonable to substitute a classic work of Japanese cinema for a human father. On the other hand, Sibylla presents Ludo with an essentially inert object, which can only repeat itself, for an agential human body who, while informed by a received set of norms and behaviors, can act and respond to Ludo in varied and indeterminate ways. Moreover, Sibylla's sense that Ludo needs a father to teach him something about masculinity evinces a certain paucity of her ability to fully reimagine familial modes of gendered relationality. It also suggests that she finds her family to be, in some sense, incomplete. Yet following a moment of doubt about her parental choices, Sibylla declares: "I suddenly realized that everything is going to be all right, I am providing my fatherless uncleless boy not with 8 male role models (6 samurai 1 gate-crashing farmer's son 1 fearless farmer) but 16 (8 characters 8 actors) 17 including Kurosawa who does not appear" (189). This is not an authorized use of a videotape, or, for that matter, a child. In fact, many of the objects she offers to Ludo—from *The Call of the Wild* and Glenn Gould records, to *The Illiad* and the Japanese syllabaries—are disproportionately called upon to perform the task of teaching a child how to be a person. The misuse of these objects aggregates a set of jarring and unexpected insertions, transpositions, and translations of objects from one system of historical and linguistic intelligibility to another. A new object or set of potentialities that emerges out of

generosity "alongside the text," to borrow Timothy Bewes' curious description of what a "reading with the grain" produces (13).[1] By transforming the potential sets of significations for cultural and linguistic objects in the archive, *The Last Samurai* works towards a version of what Rey Chow has called an "intercultural hospitality" that represents and reroutes practices of intelligibility and relationality. An "intercultural translator" acts strictly in the double-sense of the term as Chow defines it: "an arbiter of values, as embedded in disparate cultural literacies or systems" and as a figure moving texts from one language to another (568).[2] Chow goes as far to claim that "the work of contemporary 'theory'" [is] the "*undoing* [of] the destructive effects precisely of … intercultural translation" (573). But this isn't to say that "intercultural translation" is entirely without redemption. Acknowledging translation's colonizing and imperializing baggage, Chow makes a plea via Paul Ricoeur and Richard Kearney for "interlinguistic hospitality" as a guiding principle for translation and re-appropriation (574-75). DeWitt's novel, coming as it does on the heels of the PRWORA and Clinton's figuration of the village as a node on global network, attempts to open up the discourse of the archive itself to imagine discursively constituted ways that western archives can enclose the "disparate cultural literacies or systems."

[1] Bewes advocates for a "reading with the grain," as the title of his 2010 article, "Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism," obviously suggests. Bewes in interested in shaking texts free not entirely free of their historical situations, but free enough that the text can be seen as both a historical object and a contemporary actor capable of producing, when accompanied by a generous reader, new interpretations and ramifications. Bewes offers a similar take on the limits of historicism to Rita Felski's worthwhile 2011 article "Context Stinks."

[2] Chow situates her thinking on melancholy among Judith Butler's work of melancholizing gender. Chow goes as far to call this move "infinitely enabling" because Butler "paves the way for other lost objects to (re)enter the postcolonial, postmodern cultural scene and (re)claim epistemic legitimacy"(572). I want to consider the ability of lost objects and the conditions under which they are able to insinuate themselves, with unexpected meaning and attendant consequences, back into discourses and daily practices.

While Clinton's *It Takes a Village* inhospitably translates the figure of "a village" from "that old African proverb" into the neoliberal discourse of late-1990s politics exemplified by the PRWORA, *The Last Samurai* offers a hospitable space in which the fragmented and incomplete objects from disparate archives can be hospitably and playfully taken up by the economically fragmented, socially pathologized bodies of a single-mother and her fatherless boy (Clinton 13). Sibylla (whose name conjures both the Sybil of Cumae and the title character from the 1976 film *Sybil* about a woman with dissociate identity disorder) actually appears as a fragmented, archival projection of a set of texts, intellectual dispositions, and practices that are not at home in London of the late twentieth century.[3] But what happens to fragments when we extend some manner of "intercultural hospitality" to them? Must these partial objects remain fragmented and confounding as they encounter new horizons of intelligibility? Can they signify in novel and surprising directions? Sibylla's conviction to live her life with Ludo as something functional and new rather than as a fragmented, broken family unit offers a way of imagining how this hospitality might work. Sibylla repeatedly resists asking for support from Ludo's biological father, and she will not entertain a return to her parents or the United States. These stubborn refusals of material aid illustrate Sibylla's capacity to bring into existence a mode of kinship that refuses the label (if not the material effects) of a pathological fragmentation effected by the disastrous economic conditions of a single, immigrant parent performing debilitating and alienating low-wage labor. By withholding information about Ludo's father and refusing economic support from him, Sibylla rejects

[3] On her blog, Paperpools, DeWitt admitted to plucking the name "from the opening epigraph of the Waste Land (quotation from Petronius, where two boys see the Sibyl of Cumae, ask what she wants, are told that she wants to die)" ("be on the one hand")..

the possibility of paternity as both a transactional relationship and as a means of managing lines of descent. She even suggests this tantalizing alternative:

> In a less barbarous society children would not be in absolute economic subjection to the irrational beings into whose keeping fate has consigned them: they would be paid a decent hourly wage for attending school. As we don't live in that enlightened society any adult, and especially a parent, has terrible power over a child—how could I give that power to a man who—sometimes I thought I could and once I even picked up the phone but when I thought about it I just couldn't. I would hear again his breathtaken boyish admiration for lovely stupidity his unswerving fidelity to the precept that ought implies cant and I just couldn't. (72-73)

With this proposal, Sibylla takes a stand against both the "barbarism" of the family's current socio-economic interpellation and the arbitrary subjection of children to their parents on economic grounds. This enables a kind of rational argument for paying children wages simply for doing the things children do, namely, growing up to reproduce the conditions of production.[4] This economic arrangement between child and state obviously frees the parent from economic responsibility for the child, even if it ultimately falls short of recognizing parenting as essential labor deserving of a wage.

When Sibylla imagines this freedom from a materially crushing economic burden that has her typing years' worth of *Carpworld* and *Tropical Fish Hobbyist* into a computer

[4] See Chapter 1 of this dissertation. This is an echo with a difference, perhaps, of a moment in J R when a perpetually drunken Gibbs, in J R, presses on Hyde a copy of Michael Young's 1958 satire, The Rise of the Meritocracy. Gibbs echoes Young's speculative indictment of such a rise, suggesting to Hyde that he "Pay these kids salaries and they might learn what America's all about" (Gaddis JR 456). Sibylla imagines a kind of freedom here, while all Gibbs can see is the inculcation of base greed.

(a not so subtle invocation of the crushing oppression of the archive), she enables an unwieldy tangle of kinship bonds that "cannot be fully subsumed by other institutions" (Freeman "Queer Belongings" 298): she imagines kinship set free from the attendant economic and legal obligations that have historically defined it. The maternal commitments to Ludo's body, on one hand, and his intellectual and ethical development, on the other, hold Sibylla in a difficult double bind: she is required to attend to and care for his physical body by taking part in a system of economic and ideological reproduction that cannot accommodate a worldview shaped by her own unusual relationship to western intellectual and cultural traditions. Her dream is to be set free from the burden of purely economic care so that she can instill in Ludo something like what Freeman means when she conceives of kinship as a "set of representational and practical strategies for accommodating all the possible ways one human being's body can be vulnerable and hence dependent upon that of another, and for mobilizing all the possible resources one body has for taking care of another" (298).

For Sibylla, the "practical strategies" of accommodating Ludo—indulging his voracious intellectual appetite by teaching him Ancient Greek, offering him *The Seven Samurai* as a paternal replacement, engaging in some seriously free-range parenting—are new expressions of the queer desire for play she felt in the archives of Oxford. Sibylla understands her own life in terms of the archive's production, and this happens in two ways: first, the punishing and alienating data entry work she performs is one way of making one's life about producing archival objects; second, Sibylla intimates this dearly held but complicated hope: "I would like to strike a style to amaze. I think I am not likely

to discover the brush of Cézanne; if I am to leave no other record I would like to be a marvel. But I must write to be understood; how can formal perfection be saved?" (33). Ludo, in obvious ways, can be seen as a version of this marvelous record in his inheritance of both Sibylla's impressive intellect and the surprising ways she uses it. Yet to read Sibylla's wish to leave a record as entirely about Ludo as an object is to forget that the archive, per Derrida, is essentially a process. In wanting to "strike a style to amaze," Sibylla's marvelous record has to be understood not purely as object that expresses that style but instead the process and the approach that, potentially, exceed the object itself. Form, or "formal perfection," is for Sibylla more than content. Form as a process or method has the potential to transform objects and unify disparate objects into a harmonizing whole. In adopting this potential, Sibylla's style should be understood as a transgressive urge to take up and repair disparate fragmented objects and languages in order to uncover and recover hidden futures and pasts. Ludo, like the audacious multi-lingual, genre bending book Sibylla imagines authoring to be read "in the 45th-century," is simply a conduit for this style of approach to beautiful objects (33). However we understand "record" here, Sibylla writes herself into history as a process of play among beautiful and venerated objects. Objects seem only to matter for Sibylla in the ways they can be taken up as bodily and intellectually creative acts guided by stylized ideological convictions.

By enacting a set of care practices that privilege Ludo's ethical and intellectual well-being over the economically dependent safety and health of his material body, Sibylla forces a confrontation with the ways that Ludo's vulnerabilities can be hospitably

attended to in excess of established, normalized practices of care, though Ludo, because he has to eat and sleep, will remind us that his body cannot be ignored. *The Last Samurai,* while acknowledging the difficulty of releasing bodies and kinship structures from the merely economic idea of dependency, tries to uncover what new roles within kinship-like structures can be assembled on the fly. These roles appear obviously as mother, father, child, but the novel also gestures towards relational positions for which there are not yet names or for which names have been lost. The novel reminds of this positional slippage every time Ludo calls his mother "Sib," both violating the sanctity of the name "Mother" and also suggesting siblinghood, albeit in fragmented form. This designation, "Sib," offers Sibylla a glimpse of what her relationship to Ludo could be without the maternal obligation to provide financial security. Yet while Sibylla has financial relief just a phone call to Ludo's kitsch-spewing biological father away, to ask for it would be to mingle in bad faith the "disparate cultural literacies" that Chow writes about.

Even Ludo, brilliant and remarkably attuned to Sibylla's difficult situation, fails to see Sibylla's unwieldy rationality when he claims that "For someone who believes in the importance of rational argument Sib avoids the issue 9 times out of 10" (515). Impractical though this seems, Sibylla's stubborn commitment to Ludo's wellbeing, however unconventional her definition of the concept, inevitably appears as an idealized feminine attention. Even as she resists established parenting practices of obligation and occasionally leaves Ludo's body exposed to the physical and economic stress that accompanies economic precariousness, Sibylla finds resolve in a strangely rendered sense of maternal responsibility to provide a safe and nurturing space for her child's mind, if not his body,

and his sense of the world, if not his place in it. Through Sibylla, DeWitt leverages this socially potent cliché of the maternal urge to care for a child in seemingly irrational ways in order to expose the inherent pathologies of more normal representation of familial relations.

To be sure, Sibylla's mothering practices never appear as idealized or beyond reproach, but this isn't really the point. Sometimes she simply engages in some bad parenting. She does, for instance, actually lose Ludo after a particularly moving all-night concert induces a kind of amnesia that momentarily releases her attention from its obligations to Ludo: "I started thinking about the best way to get home…& then I remembered that I had moved since I last went to a concert & that now I had a son. The reason this had slipped my mind was that the seat beside me was empty" (178). Ludo, we learn, walks home alone in London in the middle of the night. Sibylla is frantic at the thought that something could have happened to Ludo, yet finding him safe at home, she wonders at the situation: "This has been terrifying but should I tell him never to do it again just because I was terrified?" (178). Ultimately, Sibylla is able to weigh the possibility of bodily harm to Ludo against her dearly held belief that her culturally and legally granted authority over Ludo is without any just grounds. She determines that Ludo must be granted this freedom in spite of the anxiety it induces in her. In doing so, Sibylla has to set aside the devastating realization that the world is largely unsuitable for childlike play. In a rather fraught scene near the novel's close, Sibylla refigures her initial act of "bad parenting" into a kind of enabling practice of care. Ludo, now aged 11, attempting to confront a potential father, plans on staking out his apartment all night. He calls Sibylla to explain his plans:

> Sibylla did not say anything for a very long time. I know what she was thinking anyway. The silence stretched out, for my mother was debating inwardly the right of one rational being to exercise arbitrary authority over another rational being on the ground of seniority. Or rather she was not debating this, for she did not believe in such a right, but she was resisting the temptation to exercise such power sanctioned only by the custom of the day. At last she said: Well then I'll see you tomorrow. (447)

By refusing "such power sanctioned only by the custom of the day," Sibylla frees Ludo to transgress the inhered logic of kinship and paternity in ways that suggest a new "style," to recall Sibylla's use of the word, of familial affiliation and care that refuses and threatens to overwrite the existing familial bonds.

Ludo ably expresses this style in his playful urge to make seemingly fragmented objects into new unities. Rejecting the inhered western logic of kinship structures with his decision to choose a set of fathers for himself, Ludo reveals the emergent possibilities for affiliation and care that Sibylla's "style" potentiates, even as he remains committed to idea of "father." In his search for a suitable father, Ludo sets out to discover how he can assemble in kinship with others beyond the structures of descent countenanced by the western "patricarhive." By deciding that he does need a human father, Ludo extends the limits of Sibylla's stylized play beyond the limits of the archive because the literature of twenty different languages, physics, mathematics, and a videocassette she provides to Ludo are not enough for him to enjoy a rich and unfragmented existence. Ludo discovers that he desires a feeling of wholeness beyond what an accommodating collection of

objects can provide, however beautiful and engaging Sibylla might find them. The lack that Ludo feels manifests itself when Sibylla, distracted by the outrageous demands on her person, demonstrates a moment of inattentiveness. In the face of this absence, Ludo imagines that

> The great thing about having two parents is that each protects you from the other. If I had a father he would notice that I was getting fed up and say Leave the boy alone, Sibylla. Or he would say tactfully I'm going over to the park to kick a ball around before it gets dark and he would offer to explain the scene to Sib himself later on. (265)

Here, some of the more traditional logic of the "whole" family is invoked but with the potential for difference. A more capacious kinship network would enable a richer and more accommodating intervention of each on behalf of each. Ludo understands familial obligation itself as a fragmenting force. Love is here, of course, but Sibylla does not or cannot accommodate Ludo in this moment. In the scene, the entire burden of care and responsibility is thrust upon Ludo, and a video or a book cannot offer Ludo the bodily intervention or relief he needs. A body, however, as a replacement for the archival objects, offers to diffuse and distribute attentions and obligations differently and dynamically across both space and time. The specific body of the imagined father offers to transform notions of familial obligation and to mobilize the structure of responsibility by multiplying the scenes of not just rational or emotional influence (this can be offered by a videocassette) but of possible bodily intimacy, care, and play as accommodation. In this scenario play is the central act, and the father figure, rather than reducing the moment to

one of interpretation, enables its generative possibilities to proliferate. It is important to note that here the imagined father doesn't clearly inscribe a hierarchy (though his paternalistic "mansplaining" does threaten as much, and Ludo does occasionally betray an indefensible male narcissism) so much as he discloses the possibility of a series of supplemental roles each body can inhabit in order to attend with love to the needs of each other.

Family Game Night and The Ludic Archive

Ludo, set free by Sibylla's permissiveness and his urge to diffuse her physical and emotional obligations to him, turns Sibylla's stylized archival bricolage into a sort of matchmaking game. In spite of Sibylla's best efforts to shield Ludo from the influence of an insufficient father figure in Val Peters, and in spite of her attempts to replace such a figure with Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai,* he does identify his paternal lack as a problem in need of a solution. While Sibylla's archival logic suggests that what is fragmented can be taken up, relationally, by whatever it appears next to, Ludo understands himself as a fragment who needs to be made whole. Reappropriating Sibylla's archival style and imposing it onto the social world of London, Ludo is able to conceive of a game in which he acquires a father figure of his choosing. After a few unsuccessful attempts at recruiting a traditionally and obviously flawed "great man" for his father—first: a murderously self-absorbed adventurer named Hugh Carey; second: an abusive mathematician named Sorabji—Ludo comes to recognize that a single father figure will fail compensate him for whatever he believes he has lost. He admits: "I thought that I was beginning to get the hang of this. I had started by picking the wrong kind of father, but now I knew what to look for I could build up a

collection of 20 or so. I felt ashamed, really ashamed of all the years I'd spent trying to identify the father who happened to be mine, instead of simply claiming the best on offer" (473). In redefining what he hopes for from a father (a village-esque twenty sets of relations instead of one), Ludo not so subtly replaces the rigid and easily fragmented arboreal structure of the family tree with one decidedly more durably rhizomatic. The substitution of the rhizome for the tree does more than replace one organizational schema for another: beyond reorganizing objects or bodies, rhizomes, per Deleuze and Guattari, actually "*produce the unconscious*, and with it new statements, different desires" (18, emphasis in original). What Ludo desires beyond the game itself isn't exactly clear, and the game appeals to Ludo because he never knows what it will produce. Whatever it might produce, however, threatens to appear as a "new statement" or "different desire." When Ludo says he cannot tell Val Peters "I am his son because it's true," he refuses to enact the relatively predictable outcome or a relationship animated by a practicable set of desires and behaviors (308). The available family models are all economically, emotionally, or intellectually insufficient. Ludo wants to restructure familial relationships and their brutal economies in ways that seem excessive and even perverse because he imagines as possible some yet-to-be defined kinship bond that conditions bodies towards indeterminate ends and uses.

Considered against the radical ends of "play" and "violence," Ludo's desire for a father figure at all, alongside Sibylla's de facto affirmation of the values of something like patriarchal influence routed through *The Seven Samurai*, seem to undermine the novel's otherwise perverse attempts to transgress established networks of familial bonds. Sibylla

identifies a specific need to develop a certain set of behaviors and obligations that find their expression and their limits via patriarchal figures. But to insist, as she does, that the film suggests that "We should draw our conclusions from the evidence available rather than from hearsay and try not to be influenced by our preconceptions" resists the popular assertion that the film and its seemingly inhospitable intercultural translation, *The Magnificent Seven,* celebrates a kind of "elite band" of masculine warriors (128-129). The suggestion that Kurosawa's original has any interest in celebrating an "elite band" of warriors infuriates Sibylla, who reads Kurosawa's film as an external threat to the inhered logic a master narrative (the western as a genre, for instance) creates and narrowly recreates to cast the hero as "elite" figure in a procession of "elite" heroes and great men, rugged individuals, and cowboys (128-29). Sibylla's account to the film, then, rejects claims that *The Seven Samurai,* as an object influenced and accepted by western film history, affirms and permeates the logic of western master narratives from within the walls of the archive. Derrida might say that *The Seven Samurai* is *consigned to* the Western archive (represented in the novel, in 1990s fashion, by Blockbuster Video) and assembles in homogeneity with it. The archive has to infect both its outside and its own body with its logic to secure "the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression" (Derrida 11). The playful archival bricolage and practices of rational assemblage that Sibylla models—her archival "style," if you will—empower Ludo to reappropriate the logic of the archive's *consignment*, inclusion, and synchronicity beyond the limits of its law. This is the foundation of the game he plays with the father figures: Ludo, in ways Sibylla cannot, refuses his own fragmentation. It's true that his

fragmentation conditions new possibilities for wholeness, but this wholeness is incomprehensible under the rubric of his initial fragmentation. Sibylla and Ludo attempt, as Chow would have it, to "undo" and repair the lost queer exteriority to this malicious and inhospitable translation/interpretation of Kurosawa's film. They want to uncover new meanings, new trajectories, and, indeed, new uses for both films and parental bodies.

In a review of *The New York Review of Books*, Daniel Mendelsohn finds the Platonic figures of "Poros and Penia, 'Resource' and 'Lack'" indispensable to putting to the novel the question of "How… do we use our available resources to assemble the rich and tantalizing fragments before us into a 'meaningful wholeness'?" Ultimately, he suggests the Platonic notion "that the child of Resource and Lack is Love." To be sure, love and acts of love are impossible to avoid in Ludo's imagined paternal intervention, as well as in the novel's remarkable conclusion in which Ludo does appear to have found a father figure who enables acts of love and generosity that exceed the culturally and legally constructed limits of familial responsibility under capitalism. But this love is never figured as a kind of byproduct or result of wholeness—or if it is, love reconfigures itself as an unbreakable whole that has always been present between Sibylla and Ludo. Kinship structures and love intrigue because they can diminish and grow across bodies and space without ever fracturing. There is no real notion of recovery for Ludo (whose name always suggests play) or Sibylla (whose name always suggests fragmentation), no long lost other-half; there is only Ludo's hope that the unity between him and Sibylla can expand and diffuse itself across multiple bodies beyond the networks and systems of economic and social fragmentation, which is opposed to Sibylla's sense that fragmentation itself always renders

emergent possibilities of relationality. Love and kinship, as they appear to Ludo, compel bodies towards acts of hospitality and even a hope for something like justice. Love and kinship conceived outside of the legal obligation linking bodies that typically share genetic material allow objects and bodies to appear together in ways not immediately determined by the narratives of pathological fragmentation or normalized notions of wholeness at the center of contemporary political discussions (the PRWORA and DOMA) of the family. Freed, at least somewhat, from their historical structures and expressions, love and kinship, as Ludo conceives of them, are free to playfully remake the structures that call on them for authorization, and in doing so, they threaten to produce ideologies and habits incompatible with things like "personal responsibility" or even "civic society." Yet love and kinship, as Sibylla understands them, are systems whose values lies in their ability to fracture and allow for reassembly.

The search for a father—or fathers—to diffuse Sibylla's acute obligation to her child eventually leads Ludo to a successful artist called Watkins. Ludo, after a few illuminating and heartbreaking attempts to enlist seemingly heroic men as his fathers, decides Watkins is perhaps more worthy because he "made a lot of money" and "never pretended to be a hero" (415). Ludo, who discovers the artist by reading his memoir in the library, prefaces the recruitment scene with Watkins by including a brief biography of the artist. Ludo explains that Watkins's only true commitment seems to be his own intense experiences of colors, which offer Watkins "a wholly new kind of mental reception of colour impression" (415). After Watkins immediately sees through Ludo's play to enlist him as father as an obvious ploy for money—and Ludo admits the single-mindedness of his intentions: "I

thought that if asked for money to go through the Andes by mule I might get it" (422)—Watkins quickly comes to see in Ludo the possibility to pass on, not his genetic material, but a perhaps more deeply ingrained commitment to emergent ways of perceiving the material world. So Watkins makes a gift to Ludo of a valuable personalized piece of art: a silk heart decorated with his own thumbprint, rendered in grime and spit, alongside Ludo's, rendered in Ludo's own blood. The piece, potentially valued at upwards of £10,000, represents a remarkable sum of money for a struggling single-mother and her child. Watkins, who wryly but affectionately calls Ludo "my old son," seems endeared to Ludo's by the way his playful paternity accusation deconstructs the relationship between obligation and consanguinity. The more obvious symbolic interpretations of the heart are also worth noting: Ludo is finally able to claim something like a blood inheritance, and that inheritance is immediately refigured in purely economic terms as both an acknowledgement of some sort of kinship and as an absolution of any continued obligation. As if to punctuate the legitimating and absolving function of the heart, Watkins writes "Washed white in the Blood of Lamb" across the piece using Ludo's blood (434).

This bloody heart, perhaps more than any object in the novel other than the video cassette of *The Seven Samurai*, represents the potential of an object belonging to an archive—which here takes the form of a London art gallery—to be taken up in ways that rupture the archival logic securing the object's economic value, cultural power, and social meaning. The bloody heart represents, on the one hand, economic relief for Ludo and Sibylla. On the other hand, however, the sale of the heart to pay the bills would betray the spirit of profligacy in which Watkins offered the gift in the first place. Paying the bills with

the whatever money the painting can be turned into would suggest a kind of tacit consent to the rigid set of economic obligations that bind Ludo and Sibylla so tightly. Rather than use the heart to buy into and affirm an oppressive and irrational economy, Ludo identifies the heart as a way to invest in obscure economies and emergent desires, as we will later see when he agrees to sell it to finance a recording for Sibylla. Watkins—whose fame enables him to produce, from a few mundane objects at hand, a valuable piece of art—appears as complicit with the system that he seems to feel disdain for, yet by giving Ludo something like capital to invest, Watkins can be seen as introducing unruly elements and actors into the economy—admitting, if you will, the possibility for a play of signification and valuation that exceeds and threatens the established practices.

How Ludo chooses to invest this capital in the novel's final recruitment scene demonstrates the threat he poses to the networks and practices of bodily obligation that inhere in notions of the nuclear family as well as in Clinton's techno-village. Ludo's final father figure takes the form of Yamamoto, the eccentric piano prodigy who gave the concert that made Sibylla forget all about her motherly responsibilities to Ludo. Through a thoroughly unprofessional set of commitments to musical fragments, African drums, and the bizarre practices he undertakes in their name, Yamamoto comes to represent the most suitable and yet least likely father figure for Ludo. Sibylla's description of the eventful concert with Ludo includes an interview with Yamamoto in which the pianist describes his artistic approach to musical fragments. He claims:

> everyone knew there were unfinished pieces Schubert's unfinished symphony the Mozart Requiem Mahler's Tenth Moses and Aaron & what made them unfinished

> was the stupid fact that the composer had not put an end to them, but if you worked on a section & got an enchantingly beautiful version that could not be used what you had in effect was a fragment, a thing that was not part of the finished work. Once you saw that you saw that you could potentially have dozens of fragments that could not be part of the finished work, and what you saw was that it was perceiving these fragments as fragments that made it possible to have a real conception of what wholeness might be in a work. (171)

Sybilla goes on to clarify that "Yamamoto said he thought you had to be able to hear how something did not work as part of a bigger thing to hear how it did" (171). This commitment to understanding how partial objects work develops into a playfully reverent approach to both the objects of his attention and an equally playfully antagonistic approach to his audience and their expectations.

We learn about the two concerts that define Yamamoto's career, and they both involve him inconveniencing his patrons and their banal obsession with train schedules. In the first concert, Yamamoto pairs his performance of Chopin's Mazurkas with four hours of percussion on huge African drums. Yamamoto's commitment to the drums results in the concert goers missing the last train of the night; in the second concert—the one Sibylla and Ludo attend—he cagily promises that no one will miss their trains; he then proceeds to repeat just a few bars of music, varied and re-varied, with strange punctuating sounds (more drums, a drill, a bagpipe) all night long until the morning trains are running again (161-179). Yamamoto, by attempting to hear things in unlikely ways and alongside unlikely objects, produces the musical fragments as a set of undetermined potentialities

rather than as a set of artifacts that memorialize what we think we know. The play of the fragments in new settings and alongside new objects makes, potentially, those who attend his concerts reconsider their own relationships to a set of objects they understood under a rigid (and perhaps petty) set of criteria and expectations for which the train schedule seems to stand in.

Yamamoto's impish commitment to play reveals itself to be precisely the thing that recommends and endears him to Ludo, and this commitment to play as both an essential practice for both the archive and the material world allows this scene to reveal the ultimate stakes of Ludo's game. Play is immediately on display as soon as Ludo's accusations of paternity begin. Ludo notes that their closeness in age—Yamamoto is Ludo's senior by not much more than a decade—makes his accusation ludicrous. The blunt response offered by Yamamoto, "What is this shit," inaugurates a bi-lingual, inter-cultural game in which Ludo and Yamamoto reproduce and repurpose a recruitment scene from *The Seven Samurai*, printed in both Japanese and English, in which a claim to certain genealogy themselves is shown as both a lie and meaningless: "*This genealogy, where did you steal it? … What? It's a lie! Shit! What are you saying"* (521-522). Ludo and Yamamoto quickly move on to discussing each of their own peculiar positions with regard to the archives, and in doing so, the two discover that they can accommodate each other. Because very few people seem to have interest in Yamamoto's obsession with fragments and variations—he has stopped giving concerts or making CDs (marking the novel very much as of the 1990s!)—he laments that "anyone who wants to hear what if can't hear it anywhere, not in the store not in the world" (525). This syntactically difficult formulation,

"to hear what if," suggests a desire to produce equally unwieldy objects that flicker between possibilities and interpretations. Ludo sees this as precisely the kind of object suited to Sibylla's attention. Ludo only mentions Sibylla and her desperation as a hypothetical, first asking Yamamoto "What if a person called the Samaritans and they weren't very helpful" (527). Ludo then assures Yamamoto that there is an audience for the prospective recording by assuring him there is "type of person who thinks boredom a fate worse than death. [A] type of person who always wants things to be different. [A] type of person should would rather die than read *Sportsboat and Waterski International*" (Ibid.). Ludo offers Yamamoto the valuable silk heart from Watkins in order to finance what they both see as an economically disastrous undertaking. While Ludo's view of the heart as hard currency simply re-affirms Watkins's art as commodity to be bought and sold, Ludo sees it as a means to an unlikely and downright irresponsible end: economic loss and the production of an object not necessarily valuable under any existing rubric. Here the personal responsibility that Ludo feels towards his mother is defined by an unlikely set of values: an affective economy takes the place of a monetary one, while intellectual desire replaces bodily need.

Yamamoto, however, remains unconvinced by Ludo's proposition. To ultimately sway Yamamoto, Ludo calls upon his prolific set of knowledge to offer Yamamoto a series of enticements including teaching him "to count to 1000 in Arabic," "the periodic table," or "survival techniques" (528). Yamamoto, the piano virtuoso, finally settles on the ridiculous proposition of Ludo—not a piano virtuoso—teaching him how to play Thelonious Monk's "Straight No Chaser." In this final scene, the polyglot Ludo and the

Anglo-Japanese figure of Yamamoto commit to using a hodgepodge set of curated objects from archives—fragments and pieces of music from the European canon, Watkins's silk heart, Ludo's collections of arcane knowledge, and Monk's jazz masterpiece—to make for Sibylla an object at odds with the system of values, habits of consumption, and modes of affiliation and obligation sustained by the archives from which these objects come. In this scene, each figure is testing the other to see if old sets of obligations can be refused and new sets taken up. In this final scene Ludo and Yamamoto unmake and remake personal responsibility and the familial systems so politically valued for producing it (see *It Takes a Village* and the PRWORA). It is a sense of familial obligation and personal responsibility that bind and animate them—both to each other and to Sibylla—but these ideological values have been transformed by the very objects and archives that produced them.

"A Matter of Life and Death"

In *Time Binds*, Freeman writes that Derrida's *Specters of Marx* meaningfully reconciles "ludic queer theory" with queer theory's more somber Marxist iterations. She claims that *Specters of Marx* "contributes to queer theory the idea that time can produce new social relations and even new forms of justice that counter the chrononormative and chronobiopolitical" (10). DeWitt's novel resonates with Freeman's formulation in *The Last Samurai's* representation of play's— particularly Ludo's— ability to transform the harmful emotional and psychological effects of capitalism into something productive, revelatory, and even reparative. In a more general sense, the novel commits to the unending speculative play that is necessarily at the heart of fiction, and in doing so, it reveals play as

a way to produce new objects that can articulate and memorialize ideologies in excess of capitalism's economic rubrics. DeWitt's text never truly forgets that its characters are marked by class.

In the last scene of the novel, Ludo's game of finding a father butts up against the exhaustive and destructive toll capitalism takes on Sibylla's body and psyche. When Ludo tells Yamamoto that the CD he has offered to produce is "a matter of life and death," he isn't exaggerating or engaging in rhetorical play. After Yamamoto initially declines Ludo's offer to produce the CD, Ludo asks: "What if someone called the Samaritans?" (526). He clarifies: "The Samaritans. They're a group of people who think anything is worse than not breathing. You can call them if you're feeling depressed" (526-27). Ludo finally reveals, if not to Yamamoto, then at least to us, what the severity of Sibylla's depression when he asks:

> What if a person called the Samaritans and they weren't very helpful? What if a person kept doing the same thing day after day after day? What if a person kept riding the Circle Line around and around? What if there was a person who thought the world would be a better place if everyone who would enjoy seeing a Tamil syllabary had access to a Tamil syllabary? What if there was a person who kept changing the subject? What if there was a person who never listened to anything anybody said? (527)

Ludo reveals, in this moment, that his playful search for a father is never truly or entirely about gaining a role model or companion for himself as much it is about figuring out how

to create a relationship that produces and attends to the set of values that Sibylla holds so dear.

Play, then, for Ludo and Sibylla is not a rejection of the material realities of their world; on the contrary, it is the most potent and transformative response they have to the crushing economic conditions of their daily life. DeWitt's novel asks us, ultimately, to consider whether or not caring for Ludo's body is as important as accommodating his intellectual curiosity. More than this, *The Last Samurai* asks us to consider Sibylla's right to take her own life while she is legally and emotionally linked to Ludo and the physical and economic care he requires. Mel Y. Chen has written about the ways toxicity forces us to understand the emergent and unwieldy possibilities for affiliation, affect, and action that appear in the seemingly everyday objects around us.[5] She cautions that "a queer toxic bond might complicate utopian imaginings, as well as address the how and where subject-object dispositions might be attributed to the relational queer figure" (265). Ludo and Sibylla risk precisely this kind of complication. Their play, perhaps conditioned by a set of toxic economic and social conditions, does more than blithely ignore the conditions of their material bodies to insist on their dignity; instead, it offers the potentially discomfiting promise of emergent modes of relationality and care that threaten to upset and reroute valuations of love, life, and belonging.

[5] Chen offers a relevant example of how toxicity can transform our relationships to objects in order to present us with a new set of potentially upsetting affiliative possibilities. Chen, whose own body is particularly susceptible to toxicity's disorienting and transformative effects, relates her reoccurring experience of confusing her couch for her girlfriend. Chen notes the way that the transitive experiences triggered by her toxicity expose "intimacies that are often ephemeral, and they are lively; I wonder whether or how much they are really made of habit" (278).

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