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Toward A Theory Of Work: Personal Responsibility, Self-Regulation, And Identity In The Age Of America's Work Crisis

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**TOWARD A THEORY OF WORK: PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY, SELF-REGULATION, AND
IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF AMERICA'S WORK CRISIS**

by

KATRINA NEWSOM

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

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Date

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DEDICATION

to Tylah and Ephraim

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INTRODUCTION

That the hygienic factory and everything pertaining to it, Volkswagen* and the sports palace, are obtusely liquidating metaphysics does not matter in itself, but that these things are themselves becoming metaphysics, an ideological curtain, * within the social whole, behind which real doom is gather, does matter.

-Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*

But deep down you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame, and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly.

- Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

The Matter of Work

What makes work such a complex topic in contemporary American culture, Nicholas K. Bromell observes, "is not that work is absent from culture, but that it is relatively invisible there" (4). To address any skepticism that might arise from his observation, especially when considering the numerous forms of representations of work in American culture, Bromell explains in his book, *By the Sweat of the Brow*:

Its invisibility is not a natural condition but a precarious achievement. Again, and again, attempts will be made within the culture to indicate and represent work, to claim that work is one thing and not another, but the culture as a whole will allow these indications and representations only a provisional reality. (4-5)

Thus, what is at stake here, according to Bromell, is a treatment of work in American culture that "deflects our attention away from the subject of work at the moment we come closest to it." Could this be, as Bromell informs, that when authors discuss work, they do so with only a mere glance or with the slightest concern seeking instead to explore topics "about the work ethic, or about the psychology of vocation of choice, or about the impact on the market economy on writer's practice or about the construction of individualism, etc." (5)? If we are to consider the copious works on these various topics and Bromell's own exhaustive discussion of antebellum literature, his observation is quite convincing. To add to it, the times when more emphasis is placed on work, as in the case of affect labor theory, the exploration of work is used to argue ideas of agency within the reproduction of emotional experiences. Essentially, what Bromell seems to aptly note in the above passages are anxieties about work within American culture. In other words, while political economists, sociologists, philosophers, and labor historians alike are dissecting every aspect of work and what looks like work to locate its nature and meaning; the role it plays in the social organization of an American society within a globalized economy; and the ways it

defines us and/or causes us to define ourselves, work is still relatively difficult to pin down for the academic and secular segments of America. This difficulty is also prominent in the field of American studies, as areas in literature, culture, and history struggle to locate meanings of work through its representations and to conceptualize it in relation to the development of categories of identity. It could very well be *this* anxiety about work, as Bromell seems to point out here, that both draws us to work and pushes us away from it.

Like Bromell, Michael Denning, attests to the invisibility of work in American culture. He observes that it is quite customary for “popular stories” in America to be reticent about representing work. In “Work and Culture in American Studies,” he notes that in various forms of storytelling emphases are placed on the leisure of life and not on work (or on the labor of production). To drive home his point, he speculates, giving a rather humorous scenario, that “a martian who hijacked the stock of the average video store would reasonably conclude that humans spent far more of their time engaged in sex than in work” (*sic* 432-3). Along these same lines, he argues that work’s invisibility is a consequence of how consumption patterns of production are easily available to us, while the processes of the production of the things we consume are not. To this end, he postulates, “[a]nd most work remains invisible” (433). In this dissertation, I adopt Bromell and Denning’s observations about work in my attempt to contribute, in a general sense, to conversations about it in American culture. Specifically, I am interested in exploring what Denning proposes about this invisibility in his assertion that it is an outcome of the ways capitalism is critiqued in the Post-Fordist period of the U. S. economy. For Denning, the critique of capitalism in this period focuses on discussions about “distribution” as opposed to the “mode of production.” In more precise terms, he asserts that, “Capitalism, we are told, is not about work but about the market” (432). My objective is to interrogate work in American culture for the ways it renders work invisible through its focus on ideas of (personal) responsibility. More specifically, I consider how ideas of (personal) responsibility take shape in concepts of self-regulation invented to function as a redress to the crisis of work in context of the retooling of work in the U.S. of the late 1970s and early 80s forward that sought to meet the demands of global expansion of markets and financialization and that collided with the social order of work within nationalist paradigms. The invisibility of work generated through the imperative of self-regulation, being a special feature of the ideology of responsibility of the Post-Fordist era, then becomes

vital in this project to understanding the collision, which I refer to throughout this dissertation as a crisis, given that this terminology helps to describe the predicament of the U.S. workforce within the contestation of an economy fast-tracking on a global scale and a nation-state that is trying to find its footing in such an economy. Hence, the task of this dissertation will not be to define work or to mark it as one thing and not another. Instead, I seek to explore the ways it gets constituted in ideas and rhetoric of responsibility. To this end, I hope to demonstrate that I am cognizant that work, just like the terms America and culture, is terminologically reflexive to historical, geographical, and political paradigms. Thus, work, in this project and in the ways that Denning asserts, is like culture; it walks the line “between conception and execution” (433).

Work Post 1970s and Affective Labor Theory

At this juncture, I would like to raise some objections that have been inspired by the skeptic in me. This skeptic tells me that I am overlooking affective labor theory in the question of work in America culture. She says to me, why has affective labor not been considered in the discussion about work’s invisibility in the culture? Does not the energy that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri wield in conceptualizing new frameworks to understand capitalism under the political economy of globalization garner some consideration? To this, my response is yes! By all means, affective labor theory should be considered; however, to the matter of invisibility it becomes a bit complicated. The complication, I reason, is marked by the objective of affective labor theory, which is to configure an autonomous subject that emerges out of the same system of work that creates its subjectivity and to present it as a move away from class as the central site for the construction of such an autonomous subject.

The concept of affective labor emerged from the Italian autonomist social movements of the 1970s and later, found a place in the academy within the philosophical writings of Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri. Affective labor, for them, categorizes an epoch of capitalism that has largely moved away from industrial (manufacturing) production and moved toward automation, information production, technology, and service industries. Hardt and Negri define it, specifically, as “labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (*Multitude* 108). As examples, they reference both waged and unwaged labor forms (i.e. home care, fast food jobs, flight attending, etc.) that manufacture experiences of personal contact or interaction

and a subsequent production of affect from those experiences. For Hardt and Negri (and other affect labor theorists), affective labor necessitates not only a restructuring of production processes; but also, a restructuring of society as well. In fact, during an interview, Hardt described affective labor in comparison to earlier stages of capitalist production including agriculture and industrial manufacturing and explained that with each epoch, there was a structuring and restructuring of the political and cultural conditions of society. For Hardt, affective labor, in what he deems the period of post-modernized capitalism, has done the same.¹

In response to this new epoch of capitalism, particularly, as it relates to the question of the nation-state within the political economy of globalization, affective labor theorists have taken to task what they see as antiquated signifiers of the nation-state: class, people, sovereignty, power, etc. By doing this, they seek after a new language to conceptualize the masses and conditions of labor in terms such as “multitude,” “affective theory,” “immaterial labor,” and in reference to Michel Foucault, “biopolitics.” They theorize how these terms help to conceptualize a framework by which to see global capitalism forming what they call globalized bodies that it exploits; but that also have the potential to resist and subvert. One way they demonstrate this is by framing affective labor within conceptions of the multitude. The multitude, for Virno, linguistically establishes a resistance to civil law through the questioning of obedience that evinces “a plurality of individuals prone to avoid (and even, at times, to obstruct) the circuits of representative democracy” and that regulates itself according to the common (40). Hardt and Negri drawing the same conclusions, reason that:

The concept of the multitude challenges this accepted truth of sovereignty. The multitude, although it remains multiple and internally different, is able to act in common and thus rule itself. Rather than a political body with one that commands and others that obey, the multitude is *living flesh* that rules itself. (100)

The essence of Hardt and Negri’s claim, in this passage, is that the term multitude offers a way to think about the masses, as constituted in the new regime of capitalism. Also, it shifts the potential power of the multitude from the political sphere of class to singularities that, as they state elsewhere in correlation with Virno’s theories, act according to common interests, needs, concerns, and so on in place of decrees or

¹ Post-modernized capitalism means, according to Hardt, in the simplest terms, labor after the modern period; also, referred to as the industrial age. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Multitude* (2004).

laws enacted by external forces. They insist that the multitude operates through self-rule. In fact, they specifically state, as quoted above, “the multitude is *living flesh* that rules itself” (100). Here, it appears that they are defining the multitude by referring to the human subject as part of a collective, having the ability to self-govern. It is equally important to note that embedded in this definition is the positionality of the multitude in relation to work. As they assert, “From the socioeconomic perspective, the multitude is the subject of labor, that is the real flesh of postmodern production, and at the same time the object from which collective capital tries to make the body of its global development” (101). However, in their undertaking to locate the subject position of the multitude, as an object of capitalism, the subject of work gets lost. Granted, their discussion does not configure work as a site of consumption patterns; however, it does enclose work within a language of singularities and self-rule that makes up, what appears to me, a concept about the autonomous subject. Furthermore, it seems to me that it makes possible the obfuscation of work within the context of the individual, the personal, autonomy, and other systems of terms that stem from concepts of singularity, self-rule, and the internal or inner self compatible with ideas of (personal) responsibility. In no way I am claiming that this is their chief intention. However, it does provide a lens to see how work, even when considered alongside affective labor theory, still remains invisible.

Proof of this is seen in the ways linguistic registers of affective labor theory have become the site where inquiries about work in America are foreclosed. With little push back, ideas of affect, biopolitics, immaterial labor among other things have been taken up widely in American literary and cultural studies. This is evident in the discursive practices of affect in literatures and criticism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century that hold it up as an ideology and signifier. Perhaps, this explains why central themes regarding the matter of work within these arenas assume the language of emotions. Or how, through this language of emotion, conjectures about work take on the language of individuality expressed in concepts about feelings, passions, desires, etc. It may also explain how and why any issue that arises from the global political economy is conceptualized in the space of the inner self and is believed to be addressed there.

Responsibility, the Ideological Curtain of Work

In this dissertation, I interrogate the conceptualization of work in the space of the self as

representative of the ways it is obfuscated by the ideology of (personal) responsibility by analyzing texts produced in America within the last thirty years. I explore immigrant literature, undercover investigations, and postfeminist films to investigate how this conceptualization of work frames the self as the site from which the problem and solution to the conditions of work (reference directly or indirectly) are addressed. My project looks at the ideology of responsibility and theorizes its mobilization of self-regulation as the basis of rationale for thinking about work. Responsibility forms, like the ideological curtain wherefrom Adorno and Horkheimer's hygienic factory and the things pertaining to them are becoming metaphysics (as indicated in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter), the basis of the fragmentary elements of the social whole made even more striking by defederalization and deregulation of the last thirty plus years that have alleviated the state and capitalism of social responsibility in accordance with the neoliberal regime of capitalist accumulation.

Thus, responsibility within America's system of work is no longer an ideology wherein questions and ideas of democracy are wrestled in regard to the nation-state, its citizens, and its workforce as a whole. Rather, it constitutes a fragmentary form of these questions and ideas situated in the context of the individual or better yet, the "personal." David Harvey refers to it as a "personal responsibility system," which he deems as nothing more than "a substitution for social protections (pensions, health care, and protections against injury) that were formerly an obligation of employers and the state." The personal responsibility system, Harvey argues, is central to the attack on labor by neoliberalization since the 1970s. Harvey explains that the security of work under the powers of trade unions and working-class institutions has been severely weakened and subsequently, workers now face a quite precarious labor market (168). He further explains that the domination of capital over the labor market leaves "[i]ndividuals [to] buy products in the markets that sell social protection instead. Individual security is therefore a matter of individual choice tied to the affordability of financial products embedded in risky financial markets" (168). In effect, the "personal responsibility system" indicates for both Harvey and me, a shift in the socioeconomic, political, and cultural paradigm between ideas of democracy, the nation, its people, and work. It is through this system that we can begin to see the fermentation of the anxieties of work alongside the material reality of it in a democratic society being simultaneously fragmented by and

conceptualized into deflated and centralized ideas of the personal, which conjures and gets nuanced by terms such as individuality, subjectivity, agency, autonomy, choice, and personal freedoms.

This form of responsibility in no way is a reclamation of ideas of responsibility pre-1970s or to those central to the founding of industrialism in this country. For whether it was Benjamin Franklin, Henry David Thoreau, or Henry Ford, who all looked to social and moral rationales of work fashioned in ideas of holding oneself accountable and disciplining oneself to the nature of work either in forms that comply with industry (Franklin); that defy industry (Thoreau); or that conform to industry (Ford), as an important regimen to moral and political liberty, ideas of responsibility are in essence bourgeois, and have served to conventionalize discourses of work even in their most radical forms (Kathi Weeks 2011).² However, what I am suggesting is that the ideology of responsibility of the Post-Fordist era possesses a special character wherein work gets framed in the contours of the individual's personhood that require orientation, control, adjustment, recalibration, and discipline of the internal aspects of the self to the logic of capitalist production outside the direct mandates of laws and supervision both in their economic and state forms. It pushes even further beyond the initiatives workers must take to gain access to work or to maintain their positions in labor productions (i.e. "walking the pavement" as many say in regard to locating work opportunities, getting appropriate attire and grooming for work interviews, or making sure to eat, sleep, locate transportation, etc. all of which are motivated by the need to maintain the self for the work life- and all of which have created sites of class conflicts on the battlegrounds of industrialism). In effect, this special character of responsibility is that of self-regulation, which refers to the continuous adjustment, recalibration, and discipline of the internal aspect of one's self to the logics of capitalism. In this sense, meanings and interpretations of work in American culture are tied to the intimate experiences individuals have with work. Thus, what we are left with is the rationale that we can get close to work to the degree we understand our internal selves and not just that; but also, to the degree we take ownership and accountability, in its many forms, of the internal aspect of ourselves. Work, in this frame, remains outside the purview of inquiries into America's crisis of work and the social conditions that reproduce work. To

² For more on the polemics of ideas and meanings of work see Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography chapter 8 [On Moral Perfection] 1758 and Henry David Thoreau's "From Life without Principle." December 26, 1854 in the anthropology of work entitled, *Literature and Work* edited by Thomas M. Kitts, 2011.

grasps this, it must be clear that work in this context, unlike labor, is material as well as conceptual. Thus, work functions discursively, not simply in denoting the physical and mental energy of society as it relates to the whole of domestic production; but also, within discourse. With this in mind, what I am referring to, then, is that realities of work are becoming, in the words of Adorno and Horkheimer, *metaphysics through the ideological curtain* of responsibility premised specifically within the conceptual framework of self-regulation. Because of this, culture's attempts to get us close to work can do nothing more than move us further from it.

Self-Regulation as a Strategy to Analyze American Literature and Culture

In this dissertation, I employ self-regulation (narrative, model, concept) as a strategy to read various cultural and literary productions in the post 1980s period forward. My interest in investigating self-regulation as a strategy to read contemporary American literature and cultural productions is, on the one hand, to add to conversations in work studies and discourses that argue the invisibility of work in American culture and on the other hand, to investigate the ways self-regulation repositions the focus on work to a focus on self (and the inner self). Self-regulation, in this sense, calls upon (in a not too dissimilar way to what the American transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson,, advised Americans in his essay, "On Self-Reliance," at the dawn of American industrialism) the volition or the individuals' power or conscious will to deliberate a course of action.³ However, its call for individual volition or power of will does not allow for obvious forms of external influence. For this reason, any attempts to employ self-regulation as a strategy to analyze literary/cultural productions must find ways to move beyond locating moments of it in the object being analyzed. Such an approach will only highlight moments in American literature when the characters or protagonists make a show of their conscious faculties (which of course makes self-regulation superfluous and unnecessary in studies of work and responsibility within literary/cultural studies). Rather, reading self-regulation outside of random moments for a more ubiquitous approach helps us to see how the response to America's work crisis becomes a very personal matter and how it is thought to be addressed at that level. In each chapter of this dissertation, I demonstrate how,

³ See Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "On Self-Reliance," written in 1841, and published later in 1888.

within the framework of self-regulation, the larger issue with work gets recapitulated in the inner workings of an individual or individual group, which become the site for both its problem and solution.

Gender, Race, and Sexuality

First, I want to say something about self-regulation as it intersects gender, race, and sexuality in this dissertation; largely because, the problem and solution of various aspects of work in America, within American literary and cultural productions, directly or indirectly correlate with questions concerning these categories. This is to say, these categories in the literary imagination and cultural conjectures become the things that must be addressed in order to contend with the work crisis. Often times, they are also positioned as the principal site where the inner self can be accessed. To get a sense of gender, race, and sexuality in relation to self-regulation, I turn to the infamous welfare reform act of the end of the twentieth century. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) is, by far, one of the most significant U.S. legislation pertaining to work since the 1970s. Enacted at the 104th Second Session of Congress and signed into law by former President Bill Clinton, the PRWORA represents a culmination of reform efforts of the 1980s and 1990s to decrease government spending for social programs in the U.S. As a bipartisan effort, it fulfilled the devolution agenda of the New Federalism policies of the Reagan Era by transferring authority and responsibility of social programs from Federal to State level governance.⁴ In effect, the States were, and are presently, endowed with authority by way of grant blocks commissioned by the Federal government for the design and implementation of programs to decrease public assistance in the form of cash benefits to two years and other entitlements to five years;

⁴ To pin the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 to the liberal agenda of the Clinton Administration only would be erroneous. In fact, the decade following the Personal Responsibility and Opportunity to Work Act saw several additional acts passed to secure more federal funding for marriage promotion and endorsement for personal responsibility with the intent to address poverty. For example, in 2002, the Healthy Marriage Initiative was created to further promote marriage among low income Americans as a way to counter poverty. And again, The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 secured more funds for the promotion of marriage and responsible fatherhood. Under this act, the funds were allotted to endorse and carry out activities through various mediums, such as high school marriage education classes, public advertising campaigns, and counseling. Even bipartisanship efforts were put in place to obtain more funding for marriage and responsible fatherhood promotion such as those of Senator Sam Brownback, R-Kan. and Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton D. –D.C. in 2006. Slated until as late as 2015, the Healthy Marriage Promotion and Responsible Fatherhood Grants through the Department of Health and Human Services awarded funds to non-profit organizations, state controlled and private institutions of higher education, for-profit and faith-based organization to promote marriage and the responsible family.

to require recipients to work or to participate in job preparation programs; and essentially, to determine what qualifies as work. Yet, the charge, promotion, and definition of work in the act fail to scaffold opportunities to work beyond job preparation. As Jerry Watts, in his essay, “The End of Work and the End of Welfare,” observes, “[A]fter reading the law [the PRWORA], I found nothing in it about generating employment opportunities, unless one calls workfare a jobs program” (412). Much like Watts, I observed the same. Other than the workfare aspect of the PRWORA, work and job preparation are only mere auxiliaries to the principal focus of the act. In fact, the principal focus of it is the need to address the crisis of the nation as defined by Congress: a crisis conceptualized through notions that an increase in illegitimate families in the U.S. has directly caused or at least contributed to the many ailments of society ranging from generational dependence on public assistance, poor social and cognitive academic performances and adjustments, criminal offences, violent crimes, concentrated violent crimes in neighborhoods, and incarceration to high levels of dropout rates among high school students (H.R. 3734-6-8). The order of addressing the need for public assistance and for promotion of work opportunities, according to this act, had to first take the form of advocacy for legally recognizable and heteronormative sexual encounters between man and woman (H.R. 3734-9). Thus, unwed mothers, teenage mothers, and single parent homes characterized, for Congress, the crisis of the nation as evident in the following passage: “The increase in the number of children receiving public assistance is closely related to the increase in births to unmarried women” (H.R. 3734-8). This correlation, according Congress, results from out-of-wedlock births following a pattern of noncommittal relationships. Therefore, their aim for the PRWORA is to legislate opportunities for two-parent homes, as a responsibility of the father and mother to ensure the “well-being of children” (H.R. 3734-8). By approaching the crisis this way, Congress sought to “end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits” (H.R. 3734-9). Such an intervention of the governing body brings to bear questions regarding U.S. politics of sexuality as defined by Michel Foucault, particularly, in terms of the ways sexuality has historically been regulated by the bourgeoisie through discourse, penalty, and reward.⁵ Additionally, it demands, on many levels, inquiries into formations of gender and sexuality contextualized through the ideal image of the American family particular to the social and political realities of America in the context of a national image, which I discuss

⁵ See Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. New York: Random House, 1978. Print.

more in chapter 4 of this dissertation by reflecting on the Moynihan report and relating it the construction of white male identity in the Post-Fordist era. Yet, what appears to me to be the most appropriate question to consider in regard to the *work question* addressed in the act is how is it that sexuality as a political trope frames for the architects and supporters of the PRWORA questions that can only seriously be addressed by considering labor markets in a global economy, work stability, and current conditions of work? Moreover, what is the importance of promoting responsibility vis-à-vis the larger question of work stability and availability in America? How does this influence cultural understanding of gender, race, and sexuality?

I recognize that it is imperative to be cognizant that sexuality, or the focus on the social forms of sexual encounters and the subsequent production of life, in the PRWORA functions as a rhetorical device principally to draw attention to what is deemed a prototype of cultural deficiencies that threatens the national order of the U.S. The use of phrasing such as “Marriage is the foundation of a successful society” or “Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society, which promotes the interests of children” not only exaggerates the role of marriage in the financial stability of millions of Americans or situates other forms of sexual relations deviant in regard to the values and attitudes presumed to be advantageous for successful living in America; but, resuscitates the racial tropes in the Moynihan report of 1965 (H.R. 3734-6). For this reason, it assumes a commonality of poor attitudes, behaviors, and values among those who need public assistance for which the act attempts to counter through workfare and penalty. The idea of shared culture of deviancy or deficiency allows for historically informed biases of marginal groups (usually black Americans) who typically suffer poverty, lower social status, and political disenfranchisement to saturate the act. As critical race theorist, James Conyers, explains in his essay, “Racial Inequality: Emphasis on Explanation,” cultural deficiency arguments presume that there is a shared culture among the lower class or marginal groups of people that generate experiences of poverty or obstructions to social advancement. He writes:

Generally, these theories assume that an independent, autonomous, ‘lower class culture’ or ‘culture of poverty’ exists which impact negatively on individuals who share such a culture. Short-run hedonism, negativism, fatalism, maliciousness, lack of planning and lack of a work ethic are counterproductive cultural values and attitudes that handicap and place individuals who share these values at a ‘disadvantage.’ (251)

Conyers's observation of cultural deficiencies helps to shed light on the redundancy in the act that directly targets out-of-wedlock pregnancies, births, and one-parent families and indirectly purports lower class, racial, and gender biases where upon notions of cultural maladjustments are generally mapped. Critics of the PRWORA argue that its mandates are directed, by and large, toward impoverished women and people of color. Ruth Sidel, for instance, points out in her essay, "The Enemy Within: The Demonization of Poor Women" that in the PRWORA "the litany of criticism against poor, single women was relentless. Mother-only families were blamed for virtually all the ills afflicting American Society" (*sic* 75). She further contends that a lot of the criticism against the poor in the PRWORA propagated racial biases against black women. Sidel observes, "One of the key myths in demonizing of poor women is that most of the impoverished, single, childbearing women are black. This image of the poor, inexorably intertwined with the long-standing baggage of racist ideology, facilitates their being perceived as deviants, as the ultimate outsiders" (76). Watts supports Sidel's claims in his recount of the display of black women at the White House signing ceremony (which I discuss in chapter 1 in conjunction with Junot Diaz's *The Brief Life of Oscar Wao*) who spoke about escaping welfare, not being fully aware that they were complicit in perpetuating a narrative that continues to hold black Americans cultural deviant. A display that, as Watts notes, was never required from racist Americans at the signing of civil rights bills (409). Nevertheless, the point here is to show the function of the rhetoric of sexuality of the PRWORA as a formula for arguments against cultural deficiencies that are mapped upon class, race and gender; and that generate a national narrative by which race, gender, and sexuality are staged for the production of America's work crisis as a personal matter that must be addressed at the level of the individual.

Self-Regulation: Its Own Brand of Crisis

The objective of this dissertation is first to, as I stated earlier in this introduction, add to conversations about the invisibility of work in American culture. However, the overall project traces self-regulation through an analysis of American literature and film that tends to go unnoticed for self-reflections, considerations, and other things that are said to come from the inner recess of the mind. In each of the chapters of this dissertation, I examine how, through the invisibility of work obscured by ideas of personal responsibility, self-regulation generates its own crisis from within the framework of the individual and the inner self where the problems and solutions are conjured. In the first chapter, I explore

this within the context of immigrant literature, focusing chiefly on Junot Díaz's *A Brief Life of Oscar Wao*. I frame my reading within Lisa Lowe and Fremio Sepulveda's observations about immigration, the U.S.'s need for a cheap labor force, and the social economic stagnation of Black Caribbean immigrants to the U.S. I read the novel to explore how the crisis of work gets constituted a crisis of hypersexuality. I illustrate, by interrogating Yunior's narration of Oscar Wao and the de Leon Cabral's family curse, the ways his tale also forwards a sub-narrative about his struggles with hypersexuality, which I argue takes the form of witnessing. This narrative act of witnessing, I argue is mobilized as a site from which Yunior's story demonstrates an exercise in adjusting, recalibrating, and disciplining his hypersexuality to the sexual norms as mandated by the PRWORA.

In chapter 2, I investigate self-regulation and explore it for the ways it takes shape in Barbara Ehrenreich's use of the confession narrative in her book, *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America*. Specifically, I dissect Ehrenreich's assessment and conclusion about low wage living to examine her use of the confession, as it allows her to both record and interpret her experiences while undercover as a low wage worker and as it mobilizes self-regulation within the intersections of feelings and perceptions of self-worth conceptualized as sites of crisis and of resistance to denigrating conditions of work that are, in fact, restricted to self-knowledge, that coalesce with the logic of U.S. neoliberal capitalism and that, in turn, work to further mystify value in the context of work and labor under the guise of measuring self-worth. For chapters 3 and 4, I shift my focus away from the narrative strategies of self-regulation and investigate the ways self-regulation gets mobilized in ideas of femininity and in white male identity. My discussion in chapter 3 concerns the question of women in the workplace and gender equality. I explore self-regulation in the films, *Working Girl* and *The Devil Wears Prada*, for the ways gender equality gets designated a personal matter and configured a contested site of femininity. Femininity, I argue, is theorized as a principal site of anxieties for women in the workplace, whereby issues that typically emerge from social relations between women and men in this space are somehow constituted as personal or internal matters for women (and among women) defined in terms of their femaleness or sexuality and are said to be addressed at that level. Through an analysis of the two films, I demonstrate how femininity becomes the site for both the issues that are thought to define and the solutions that are imagined to resolve America's work crisis. My final chapter, on the other hand,

considers the question of self-regulation within the framework of white (male) anxiety. I turn my attention to Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*, a novel about a hermaphrodite, who threads his experiences about being born a girl and later, at the age of fourteen transforming into a boy through a narrative about his family's history to detail his matriculation into a heterosexual white male identity. The crisis in this chapter, I argue, is the white (male) anxiety produced by his immigrant status and sexual ambiguity, which he attempts to mediate through a self-making narrative. I read the self-making narrative of this novel as a site of self-regulation that evinces the adjustment, recalibration, and discipline of white identity premised in the construction of what a white identity is and is not in contrast to a black presence and in denial of larger social determinants.

The body of work I have chosen for this dissertation is particularly germane to my exploration, given that each offers representations of various contested sites of work in America in areas that include the immigrant question, low wages, women in the workplace, and the de-industrial urban settings. They also illustrate, on various levels, self-regulation in the ways that it directs thoughts and conceptions about work and espouses to be the solution to America's work crisis. What I shall show in my analysis is that whether the texts implicitly or explicitly address work, self-regulation represents the conflict in the human experience of America's work either in fictitious and/or pseudo-factual forms and moves or, better yet, restricts the narrative and language expressing this conflict to the matter of self wherefrom it seeks and consolidates a resolution.

CHAPTER 1 SELF-REGULATING SEXUALITY: READING GENDER ANXIETY IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), as representative of the ways the tradition of immigrant literature responds to America's work crisis. This widely praised novel has received much recognition within critical scholarship of immigrant literature and ethnic studies, as an example of literature written from the perspective of the immigrant's experience in the U.S. even to the second and third generations through which sites of cultural histories, characteristics, values, and norms conflicted by formations of identity and by the assimilationist imperative of American culture are aesthetically mediated and examined.⁶ Moreover, it is said to hold a unique place in the tradition of the family saga immigrant narrative that intersects the coming to the U.S. tropes of mobility and historical imaginings of a family's history and native land. Its uniqueness specifically for women of color studies, transnationalism inquiries, and linguistic registers is attributed to the novel's plot of the family fukú (or curse) and to the hypersexuality of the narrator-protagonist, Yunió, which are deemed ripe with meaning where new sites of race, gender, and sexuality within the tradition of recovering identity for a Dominican Diaspora can be mapped.⁷

For the purpose of this project, I also read *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (TBLW) for its exploration of the immigrant's experience in the U.S. complicated by an ethnic history and an assimilationist national imperative. However, I read it for the ways it brings to the fore questions of gender anxieties of the ethnic male sexuality; specifically, within the context of immigrant narratives that lean on America's cultural sentiments of work in this late stage of U.S. capitalist modes of production. While I recognize that a specter of race haunts the novel in its configuration of its characters, considering that Díaz's principal characters are configured through their experiences as Latin-Americans, on the one

⁶ Critical scholarship on Díaz's works (TBLW) is copious to say the least. For example, see Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination, a compilation of critical essays on Díaz's work that was put in print April 2016.

⁷ See Rune Graulund's "Generous Exclusion: Register and Readership in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" (2014); Monica Hanna's "'Reassembling the Fragments': Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" (2010); Tim Lanzendörfer's "The Marvelous History of the Dominican Republic in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" (2013); José David Salvádar, "Conjectures on 'Americanness' and Junot Díaz's 'Fukú Americanus' in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" (2011); and Deborah R. Vargas' "Sucia Love: Losing, Lying, and Leaving in *This Is How You Lose Her*" (2016), to name a few.

hand, and through the gradation of their skin color, on the another; and that he conceptualizes their experiences through, and here I am using Manning Marable's phrase in the book, *Beyond Black and White*, "prisms of race" or "the constructed identity...create[d] to interpret their experience of inequality and discrimination" within the hierarchy of racial formations in the U.S, I contend that Díaz does not directly problematize race or situate it as a site of resistance in the novel (Marable 8). Rather, I argue that he utilizes ethnicity to problematize sexuality in forms that produce gender anxiety and prioritize constructions of masculinity through which his protagonist, Yuniór, seeks to gain access to routes of assimilation into an American culture redolent of the social reproduction of work in the U.S. Gender anxiety, in this context, refers to the distress and uneasiness Yuniór has regarding his sexuality specifically, as it relates to his sexual behaviors and roles. To this end, my analysis of *TBLW* probes the ways gender anxiety constitutes the dilemma Yuniór has with his sexuality, which I also argue is the chief object of contention in the novel. It necessitates that Yuniór's sexuality be made manageable, adjustable, and subject to discipline and recalibration. Moreover, it solicits the prioritization of constructions of masculinity recognizable to the social reproductions of accumulation in the U.S. By analyzing this novel in the framework of work shaped by ideas of responsibility, as they are constructed in sentimentalities of accountability and blame by which the individual is required to regulate the self through forms of adjustments, discipline, and recalibrations according to patterns and demands of the contemporary regime of capitalism and by which we currently define our thinking about work; I move the question of gender anxiety into the critical context of America's work crisis, recognizing that this crisis refers to the instability that America's working sectors face after the retooling of work post1970s that also sees to a diminishment in manufacturing and an advancement in the service industries and technological process. Specific to the immigrant experience, however, this crisis, as Lisa Lowe and Grace Kyungwon Hong explain, requires that immigrants be made a cheaper labor force to meet the United States' need and demand for cheap labor through acts that racialize and gender them, while simultaneously rendering them virtually invisible in America (*Immigrant Acts* 1996; *Ruptures of American Capital* 2006, respectively). In respect to *TBLW*, this crisis shows up in the novel's attempts to illustrate what Fremio Sepulveda informs as the socio-economic stagnation that black Caribbean immigrants encounter in the U.S. configured in the characters Oscar, who, after graduating from college, struggles to find employment

in the early years of the Clinton administration when according to Yuniors, “the economy was still sucking an eighties cock” and Oscar’s mother, Beli, who works three jobs to support her family (Sepulveda 18; *TBLW* 263). This is aside from the fact that the story itself is framed within the production of writing of Yuniors, who also, as a creative writing teacher at a community college, barely escapes the economic enclaves that, according to Sepulveda, typically ensnare black Caribbean immigrants.

The significance of such an endeavor is that it allows me to investigate several essential concerns I have as they relate to this novel, the subject of work, and the general question of responsibility that this project poses to the field in regard to the literary and cultural traditions’ response to America’s sensibilities of work in this age of work crisis: First, what do anxieties of gender in this novel signify in relation to America’s sensibilities of work? Second, and more broadly, what does an analysis of this add to conversations regarding the literary and cultural traditions’ strategy in responding to the cultural shifts in America due to changes with work in the Post-Fordist era? Last, when we consider the concept of responsibility within formations of gender and race of this late stage of capitalist modes of production that code these identities within America’s system of work, can the immigrant novel do what it has done so long ago, - avail to us a conscious, even if not a self-conscious, understanding of the role of work in American society?

Reading Self-Regulation

While these questions guide my investigation of this novel, the central task of this chapter will be to map out on the local terrain the ways *TBLW* confronts anxieties of gender through categories of sexuality used to reconstitute the hetero-normative family. The hetero-normative family that I refer to here relates to what Kathi Weeks notes as capitalism’s dependence “on a family-based model of social reproduction” under conditions of Fordism (27). “The institution of the family,” in this frame, according to Weeks, “not only helps to absorb reductions in the price of labor and to produce lower-cost and more flexible forms of feminized labor; but also, provides the ideological basis for relieving the state and capital from *responsibility* for much of the cost of social reproduction” (emphasis added 121). Hence, Weeks’ observations about the institution of family and its functions in regard to capital and the state help to suture an analysis of the novel’s treatment of sexuality and its production of gender anxiety to historical specificities of work of contemporary U.S. capital production and accumulation.

Within this trajectory, I will outline conceptions of masculinity within sites of ethnicity and gender, as they play out in the recovery of the innermost thoughts and emotions of those of the past and as they take shape in the novel. Last, it will chart on the global terrain the ways this reconstitution of the heteronormative family in this novel, as representative of literary and cultural strategies of immigrant/ethnic literatures and narratives help us to see its response to America's work crisis. The significance of the tasks is to extend the study of ethnic American literature to include a look at questions of labor and work crises in hopes to argue for a broadening of critical reading of the subject of work in the field of American literature and studies writ large.⁸ In doing so, I seek to trace the conceptualization of self-regulation within the frame of responsibility, as a mode of thinking about work in immigrant literature and as evident in this novel.

In the course of tracing the conception of self-regulation as a way of thinking about immigrant literature, I examine the ways memory and fictionalized history in *TBLW* are employed to stabilize the sexuality of the ethnic male in the context of de/coloniality and U.S. imperialism, specifically in relation to the recollection of a Dominican Republic under the Trujillo regime and a Dominican Diaspora. In fact, I argue the act of remembering is the site of self-regulation and the impetus from which Yunior demonstrates adjustment to and discipline of his sexuality in parallel to America's cultural sentiments about work. He does this as a narrator-witness who purports to translate, or rather inscribe the innermost thoughts and emotions of those remembered and to enclose it in his narrative about his personal issue with hypersexuality.

Also, I draw upon Sarika Chandra's theorization of nationalist paradigms in a global context developed in her book, *Dislocalism: The Crisis of Globalization and the Remobilizing of Americanism*, delivering a critique of the ideological and discursive formation of globalization. Looking at a broader literature and culture produced in the post 1980s period, her discussion centers on how the various practices to globalize modes of U.S. intellectual thought, cultural and literary practices worked to consolidate U.S. nationalist paradigms. A practice of displacement and consolation termed dislocalism allows us to pay attention to both the discursive practices and the historical conditions that give rise to the

⁸ Here, I am referencing the works of Lisa Lowe, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Grace Kyungwon Hong to name a few. In regard to critical reading of work, I lean on the arguments of Nickolas K. Bromell and Michael Denning, who contend that work is typically viewed in representational forms.

discourse. Immigrant/ethnic literary studies, as part of the broader scholarship in American Studies, in her analysis, functions as a site of such consolidation. Immigrant literature itself, “an object of scholarship” becomes entangled in political rhetoric and conceptions of immigration now complicated by “globalized realities” (88-89). She holds up contemporary conceptions of immigrant literature as an example of dislocalizing practices, noting that “concepts of immigration and immigrant literature...also assist American literary studies in reconstructing a nationalist paradigm even while attempting to globalize or update disciplinary practices” (85). The implication of this, according to Chandra, is that as the field seeks to “discover language of the global within the national” it does so by “globaliz[ing] the field while leaving the older curricular paradigms to continue essentially unaffected or threatened.” Of this, she surmises that concepts of immigration and immigrant literature are consigned to rhetoric that merely gives the semblance of “de-centering American literature,” thereby, confining them to the “level of terminological rather than conceptual” (85; 17). While, the complexity of her observations here engages her broader argument on the “adaptive response to globalization” by which conceptions of immigration and immigrant literature are but one of the “ideological strategies for positing U.S. as *both* a global and a local place;” for the project at hand, they provide a framework to consider immigrant literature alongside self-regulation (10). Particularly, they help to explain the paradigm by which it is possible to read *TBLW* for the ways it filters its narrative through the Dominican Diaspora, but only to the degree that it remains recognizable to the U.S. assimilationist imperative. This is confirmed in her assertion that immigrant literary studies globalize narratives of immigrant literature through the “privileging [of] the immigrant experience,” but only to the extent it “remains immigration *to the U.S.*” What is most significant here is that she avails to us a double meaning of “immigration *to the U.S.*” On the one hand, it denotes the direct migration to the U.S.; and on the other hand, it connotes the ways conversations and examinations of immigration within fields of American literary/cultural studies are tethered to the United States’ “national-historical specificities” (17). This is particularly important to my readings of this novel for several reasons: First, it allows for an understanding of the verisimilitudes of history, which appear pertinent to the author’s configuration of characters who, as Chandra points out in her general discussion of immigrant literature, “pursue [a] personal recovery and reinvention” consigned to a notion of pursuit “that only the space within the boundaries of the U.S....can provide” (108). Arguably, this is evident in the protagonist’s narration, despite

the fact that his story drifts back and forth across time and ocean. Within his narration, Yuniór's acts of historical remembering that seem to give him access to trauma specific to "real" historical events really express his gender anxiety incited by his hypersexuality that he attributes to the "typical Dominican male" and that is in conflict with America's political and cultural norms. For this reason, I contend Yuniór regulates himself on different registers according to adaptive processes that arbitrate both issues of race and gender through routes of assimilation to the U.S. As Chandra explains, even though immigrants, "must of course face the realities of racism and sexism in the U.S.... the accompanying implication here is that immigrants are nevertheless free to reinvent themselves as Americans, even when struggling with the pain of adaption" (108). Second, and keeping with the discussion of America's primacy in narratives of immigrant literature, Chandra's observations also help to convey in my reading of *TBLW* my use of the term America as a referent for the practices in the scholarly arena designated as American studies.⁹

"...Then You Don't Know the Dominican Male": Yuniór's Hyper/sexual Responsibility

Yuniór de las Casas shows up in Díaz's collections of short stories, *Drown* (1996) and *This is How You Lose Her* (2012) in addition to the novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, (where he is referred to only as Yuniór) and serves, according to Díaz as "the book's most salient proponent of the masculine derangements that are tied up to the rape culture...he is its biggest proponent and its biggest 'beneficiary'" (397). In his interview with Paula M. L. Moya, Díaz describes Yuniór as one of Trujillo's children (metaphorically of course) while concomitantly, a victim of the Trujillo's legacy. Yuniór, he states, is a "victim in the lowercase sense because his failure to disavow his privileged position in that rape culture, to disavow the masculine discourse and behaviors that support and extend that culture, end up costing the love of his life, his one best chance at decolonial love, and through that love, a decolonial self" (397). In proportion to Díaz's postulation of decolonial love elsewhere, we are left to assumed that Yuniór's inability to grasp it is his failure to resist the "economies of attraction that continue to resemble, more or less, the economy of attraction of white supremacy" (Díaz 2012). Thus, according to Díaz's logic,

⁹ I take the terminology of America from the description given by Sarika Chandra in the introduction to her book, *Dislocalism* where she writes the following: "I use the term America here cognizant of what is already the ideology conveyed by the word itself, making it into what might almost be considered the semantic derivative rather than the root of words such as Americanism and Americanization and also as a way of pointing to the blatantly ideologizing content of the word when, forgetting the existence of the America(s) south of the Rio Grande, it is used as though synonymous with the national identity called the United States" (4).

Yunior's failure at decolonial love registers precisely in what he defines as promiscuous behavior found in the acts of uncommitted love, multiple sexual partners, and unplanned pregnancies (i.e. "chasing the pussy" (184); "fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches *at the same time*" (185); and getting Lola pregnant (269)) - behaviors that Yunior himself contributes to his Dominican masculine hyper-sexuality: "What I should have done was check myself into Bootie-Rehab. But if you thought I was going to do that, then you don't know Dominican men" (175). Suffice it to say, the twist here that Díaz reveals in his interview with Moya is that Yunior's promiscuity results principally from his experience as a rape victim. "Think about it" Díaz insists, "isn't promiscuity another typical reaction to sexual abuse. Compulsive promiscuity is certainly Yunior's problem" (sic 398).¹⁰ While Yunior's problem with promiscuity can be easily identified in the novel, his rape cannot. Unlike in Díaz's other works, in *TBLW* Yunior's rape is neither detailed nor explored. Nevertheless, by making this authorial confession, Díaz conceives Yunior's hypersexuality in terms of promiscuity as a production of a history of trauma and as, at one and the same time, acts of aggression and passivity. In other words, according to what Díaz shares, Yunior's narration contains a discourse influenced by his bilateral position as both beneficiary and victim of a culture of rape (399). However, these same characterizations posit Yunior's promiscuity in a precarious space between the racial assumptions of Latino identity within America and diasporic Dominican-American identity tied to a memory of the Dominican Republic wherefrom stereotypes of the typical Dominican male are imported.

This may help to explain why many critics, including Fremio Sepulveda, look to Oscar, the tragic hero of the novel, as central to Díaz's interventions into the question of race that finds its expression most markedly in the Dominican male sexuality and that is situated precisely within "colonial/neo-colonial history" that shapes the "contemporary life of Dominicans" as they struggle to find "a restorative future unburdened by longstanding hierarchies and colonial relations" (20). For instance, Sepulveda writes:

¹⁰ In the interview with Paula M.L. Moya, Díaz further explains that Yunior's promiscuous behavior is a result of being raped. He reveals that it is this experience that destroys Yunior's relationship with the love of his life, Lola. He discloses, "He has been raped too.... This is what Yunior can't admit, his very own *página en blanco*. So, when he has that line in the novel: 'I'd finally try to say the words that could have saved us. / _____, _____, _____,' what he couldn't say to Lola was that 'I too have been molested'" (397-8). Through this revelation about Yunior, Díaz tries to further explain and excuse Yunior's promiscuity. The reason for such an explication of Yunior's promiscuity years later is not clear. However, its relevancy is only significant to the degree it further demonstrates a type of shame that constitutes Yunior's hypersexual behavior.

As the novel's tragic hero, Oscar is doubly stigmatized as a dark-skinned overweight Dominican who embodies a different kind of masculinity at odds with the stereotypical, highly sexualized notion of what a Dominican male must represent. To be a Dominican male is therefore equivalent to upholding the values of a hypersexual masculinity which Oscar indeed fails to embody. Nor can he claim identity within the larger Anglophone community, which also resists affirming his humanity. (20)

Sepulveda, in this passage, focuses on the ways the novel portrays Oscar as a Dominican-American tragic hero for failing to embody Dominican male masculinity and for being trapped within American racial hierarchies. However, in arguing the ways Oscar constitutes a crisis for the stereotypical Dominican male identity, in both skin color and sexual behavior, Sepulveda misses the opportunity to recognize that Oscar's position as a tragic hero and an archetype is an invention of Yuniors and that Yuniors's narration of the de Leon and Cabral family's fukú story does a little more than tell the story of an undersexed dark skinned Dominican boy in Paterson, New Jersey whose "brief wondrous life" frames a tale that seeks to "[capture] how a people have come to explain their historical experience under the eradicating force of a madman, who not only renamed cities after himself (turning Santo Domingo into Ciudad Trujillo) but who silenced, when not destroying, all oppositions" (Sepulveda 22). Yuniors's narration brings Latino-American male sexuality to the fore of America's work crisis as dictated by the legislations of the 1990s, in particular the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) that sought welfare reform through the re-promulgation of America's work ethic. This Act, according to Congress, addresses the calamity of unemployment and the urgent need for public assistance for many American citizens by first promoting work opportunities that take the form of advocacy for legally recognizable and heteronormative sexual encounters between man and woman (H.R. 3734-9).¹¹ Following the logic of sexuality of the Victorian bourgeois pointed out markedly by Foucault, the Act defines the crisis of work in

¹¹ Detailed further in the subsection of the PRWORA, titled "Purpose," are specific orders to address illegitimacy and what is believed to be the subsequent effect of it on personal and familial responsibility. The following passage is emphasized for the magnitude of infringement of the government into the lives of its citizens:

"(a) IN GENERAL. —The purpose of this part is to increase the flexibility of States in operating a program designed to— (...)

(3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and

(4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families." (H.R. 3734)

The irony here, of course, is the devolution of government responsibility for relief programs that purports to eliminate precisely such intrusions as indicated above by transferring the responsibility of social programs to the State and their constituents. How this contradiction gets overlooked and why questions regarding the economic arrangements of globalization are penned in cultural concerns only are certainly questions for the 21st century.

the nation as a matter of sexual deviancy that ostensibly signals cultural deficiencies and designates it a threat to the socio-economic and cultural order of America. Thus, the objective of the Act, as Congress explains, seeks to regulate behaviors (in forms of prevention and reduction) that could lead to unwed parents, teenage mothers, and single parent homes, as detailed in the following passage:

Therefore, in light of this demonstration of the crisis in our Nation, it is the sense of the Congress that prevention of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and reduction in out-of-wedlock birth are very important Government interests and the policy contained in part A of title IV of the Social Security Act (as amended by section 103(a) of this Act) is intended to address the crisis. (H.R. 3734-8)

Congress furthers the point by drawing a correlation between the need for public benefits and acts of unwedded copulation: “The increase in the number of children receiving public assistance is closely related to the increase in births to unmarried women” (H.R. 3734-8). This correlation, according to Congress, results from out-of-wedlock births that follows a pattern of noncommittal relationships. Therefore, their purpose for the PRWORA is to legislate in favor of opportunities for legitimate coitus and to ensure, “the promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood” for the “well-being of children” (H.R. 3734-8).

Even though this act arguably represents what David Harvey refers to it as a “personal responsibility system,” which he deems as nothing more than “a substitution for social protections ...that were formerly an obligation of employers and the state” and that has been central to the attack on labor by neoliberalization since the 1970s and to questions of race and gender; it stands as the crux of Yuniors narration (168). This registers most notably in the novel in the ways Yuniors gender anxiety directs the historical accounts and stories he shares and exposes his stories as forms of introspection fashioned by internal mandates that function to regulate his gender anxiety in an effort to redress his hypersexuality to the cultural order of the American working-class tradition expressed largely in the Act. Thus, while Yuniors story of Oscar’s mother and sister seem demonstrative of the concerns of the Congress and the purpose of the Act in preventing “out-of-wedlock pregnancy and reduction in out-of-wedlock birth”- considering, if we will, his tale of Belicia, that includes her lecherous affair with Trujillo’s sister’s husband, Dionisio (the Gangsta) and her subsequent pregnancy; the violent beating she suffers for this affair at the hands of Trujillo’s henchman in the same field her son would be murdered years later; the loss of an unborn child due to the beating and her subsequent journey to the U.S. where she marries, divorces and

later, lives as a single working mother of two children; or his story of Lola that tells of her encounters with various men in her attempts to escape the emotional and physical abuse of her mother,- it is Díaz's conception of Yunior's promiscuous behavior that symbolizes the concern and crisis of sexual deviancy defined by the Act (H.R. 3734-8). So, if we revisit the passages that detail his promiscuity in which he admits to "chasing the pussy" (184); "fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches *at the same time* and that wasn't even counting the side-sluts I scooped at the parties and the clubs" (185); and getting Lola pregnant (269), it is apparent that Yunior's sexual behavior also evokes the language of the PRWORA and thus, is the object in need of discipline and regulation.

The Responsible Witness and the Privilege Proximity

Given the special character of responsibility in this age of work crisis, Yunior must conscientiously regulate, discipline, and adjust his hypersexuality to America's culture of work. This conscientious regulation and discipline surface in the ways Díaz writes Yunior as author-witness to the de Leon and Cabral's family fukú. The witness act of Yunior's narration materializes specifically in the persona he creates as the "Watcher,"- one that he premises in the proclamation: "Let me, Your Humble Watcher tell you the God's Honest Truth" (4). The persona of the "humble Watcher" is loosely based on a character in Marvel comics named Uatu the Watcher, who observes the earth from the Blue Area of the Moon. Much like Uatu, Yunior's purpose is to "observe and mentally record the lives of others...for the sake of eventually sharing it with [his] fellow Watchers" (Marvel Comics Wiki). The idea of telling the God's honest truth is questionable, however, given that even Yunior admits to anachronism in regard to taking liberty in changing the names and locations of places in the account he gives of the de Leon Cabral family story (Monica Hanna, 93).¹²

On the other hand, his proclamation of "telling" brings us to the heart of the matter of the conscientious regulation of his hypersexuality in the form of witnessing. In many ways, his act of "telling" is congruous with John Durham Peters' definition of the witness in his essay, "Witnessing." There, Peters

¹² Monica Hanna points out in her reading of *TBLW* that there are numerous contradictions in Yunior's story. She notes one such example when Yunior discusses the birth place of Oscar. At one point, Yunior states that Oscar and Lola were born after Belicia moved to the United States and vowed never to return to the Dominican Republic. Elsewhere, he writes that Oscar lived in the Dominican Republic for the first couple of years of his life (93-4). Hanna surmises this to be the result of a "logical lapse in the story" (94). Whether or not this is a logical lapse, what it does reveal is the magnitude of "the true authorial power" Díaz endows his main character as narrator.

not only defines the witness as “an observer or source possessing privileged (raw, authentic) proximity to facts,” he also informs that witnessing can take the active form of “saying.” To make a distinction from the passive form of witnessing, which merely sees the events as they unfold, Peters explains, “[I]n active witnessing one is a privileged possessor and producer of knowledge in an extraordinary, often forensic, setting in which speech and truth are policed in multiple ways” (709). Returning to Yunior’s proclamation of “telling the God’s Honest Truth,” it is quite evident that his telling follows Peters’ model of “saying” in active witnessing under the terms that he does not simply see the events as they unfold; he tells them according to his authorial power. Jennifer Harford Vargas explains his narration this way, “Yunior loosely functions as a dictator in both senses because he controls and orders representations and because he collects, writes down, and reshapes a plethora of oral stories that have been recounted to him” (9). While her point is to make a claim about the tensions between authorship and dictatorship that the novel presents, her use of the term “dictator,” in the same vein as such terms as regulation, policing, control, and discipline, is nothing more than a nomenclature for the authorial power Díaz endows Yunior in the novel.

In knowing that Díaz writes Yunior as the author of the story, it is a wonder that his authorial power appears pertinent and not superfluous to critical readings of the novel. Perhaps, this is because there is something about Yunior’s narration and his self-proclaimed identity as the Humble Watcher that unsettles a reading of it. It could be a fault of the duplicity of his proclamation. Monica Hanna in, “A Portrait of the Artist,” explains it this way, “As the narrator, Yunior often dissimulates regarding the true power that he holds, luring the reader in by revealing just enough of his writerly manipulations to make the reader feel complicit, while insisting on the overall truthfulness of his story” (93). Thus, according to Hanna, the dissimulation regarding his authorial power is Yunior’s attempt to create an alliance with the reader in order to establish and maintain credibility even though the question of truthfulness shadows his narration. The effectiveness of this strategy comes by way of positioning his authorial power in harmony with an active form of witnessing (i.e. policing the telling of the events), while also appearing to take a passive stance in watching the events unfold. This may help to explain the unsettling feel of the novel as the reader tries to grapple with the duplicity of Yunior’s active and yet, passive narrative strategy. In view of Hanna’s description of Yunior, “as a narrator of the lives of the de Leon and Cabral family, a ‘watcher,’ as

he calls himself, which is a rather neutral term, attesting to his role as a type of archivist or historian, a mediator or translator, but maybe also as a 'parigüayo,' in the sense that he can only look on while the events unfold;" the thing that unsettles the narration reflects best in the question, which narrative role are we to believe: the one in which he tells the story or the one in which he watches it (93)?

To complicate this further, Hanna suggests that the term "watcher" indicates a sort of neutrality in narration, thereby denoting a distancing in proximity to the objects observed, recorded, and discussed; however, the "privileged proximity" wherefrom Yuniór witnesses reveals quite the opposite. Even if part of his narration requires the watching of events as they unfold, the proximity he has to the de Leon and Cabral family places him far from neutral. In truth, he holds a subject position in the story and his proximity and position within it are formed through his failed romantic relationship with Lola. Therefore, the neutral position and distanced proximity he claims are contradicted by the story he writes in parallel to that of the de Leon and Cabral family that tells of his perilous relationship with Lola destroyed largely by his compulsive and excessive sexual behavior: "Couldn't keep my rabo in my pants, even though she was the most beautiful fucking girl in the world" (311). What this all really means is that Yuniór's watcher/witness position serves an underlined purpose beyond giving what one critic surmises as "a uniquely Dominican-American fantasy perspective that enables Dominicans to recover in the diaspora a sense of how to relate to their history, even as that history remains tantalizingly out of reach" (Tim Lanzendorder,127). To a large extent, it allows him to actively witness a Dominican history that he remembers and imagines along the lines of his own concerns with hypersexuality.

With this in mind, I contend his acts of witnessing are in no way passive in the sense of Peters' definition of passive witnessing or Hanna's observations. Instead, he does exactly what Peters informs regarding active witnessing and Vargas demonstrates in terms of authorial dictatorship: he polices not only the facts, but his *truth* in multiple ways. Even more importantly, the policing of the representations and knowledge he gathers, and recounts works in concert with the task of disclosing the modulation of his hypersexuality as a Dominican American male in late 20th and early 21st century America. Another way to state this is to say that through the narrative structure of witnessing, Díaz writes Yuniór as an author who not only recounts and shares the stories of others; but also, who tries to address his gender anxieties through the narrative act of telling their stories. This occurs in two ways in the novel. First, in the ways he

uses the rhetorical strategy of inventing the innermost thoughts and emotions of Abelard, Belicia, and Oscar under the threat and legacy of Trujillo's rapacity in an effort to wrestle his sexuality from that legacy; and second, in the ways he critiques his own sexual behavior that struggles against America's sense of cultural efficacy in regard to sexuality and work. To identify Yunior loosely as a narrator-witness as opposed to say a narrator-dictator alters the way we can read the proximities to the characters he establishes in the novel and provides an occasion to see how his form of witnessing embodies conjectures of responsibility of this late stage of capitalism. Moreover, it allows us to observe how this responsibility, in accordance with Janet Zandy's brief conception of witnessing considered in the tradition of working class studies, seeks to arrange a connection between the observer and those observed. This connection, she claims, can be viewed as a form of responsibility that requires the observer to make visible and audible those ignored by history. For Yunior, it is a Dominican Republic history that obfuscates the tragedies of those subjected to Trujillo's rule and the de/colonial presence dictated by hierarchies of race and gender that Dominican-Americans must confront. Yet, in keeping true to the anxieties he faces, he focuses his observations and his connection to those who are not seen or heard on a history that looks to questions of sexuality mediated by ideas redolent of one of the most effective superstructures of America's system of work: the hetero-normative family.

As indicated above, one important aspect to Yunior's witness act is to establish a proximity to the things he observes, records, and shares and he does this through his tumultuous romantic relationship with Lola. In fact, the proximity established by his relationship with Lola permeates his entire story. If we consider the novel closely, the point of reference for this story does not truly start with his observations of Oscar or Oscar's lack of Dominican-ness nor does it begin at the transportation of the fukú from African to Hispaniola as some scholars assume; rather, arguably, it begins when he meets Lola at the pre-fresh weekend at Rutgers College and later, after he has a fling with her beginning the sophomore year (169). Lola is the starting point to his story and it is through her he connects with the rest of the de Leon and Cabral family. Even more so, it is through their tumultuous relationship that Yunior assumes a personal presence in his recount of their stories, acquires access to Oscar's journals and fictional writings, and obtains firsthand accounts and testimonies of some of the events that inform his fukú story of Oscar. So significant is this relationship to his overall story that when his tale about Oscar begins to veer off to the

history of the Cabral family, it is Lola's voice that transitions the story from Paterson, New Jersey to the Dominican Republic. In fact, his connection to Lola is what makes him apart of Oscar's life. For instance, while at Rutgers, as a quasi-favor for Lola, he rooms with Oscar. Deeming it more of an act of self-preservation rather than one of benevolence, Yuniór recalls choosing to not only room with Oscar; but, after Oscar suffers a bout of depression resulting from being rejected by a girl, he decides to watch over him while Lola is in Spain:

I liked to play it up as complete philanthropy, but that's not exactly true. Sure I wanted to help Lola out, watch for her crazy-ass brother (knew he was the only thing she really loved in this world), but I was also taking care of my own damn self. That year I'd pulled what was probably the lowest number in the history of the housing lottery...which meant my chances for university housing were zilch to none...which mean that Demarest, for all its freakery, and Oscar for all his unhappiness didn't seem like so bad an option. (170)

Although, the much older Yuniór downplays his affection for Lola and defines his interaction with Oscar as a way of "taking care of my own damn self," this role of Watcher over Oscar, which he self-proclaims elsewhere in the novel develops from his direct and desired connection to Lola. More than trying to avoid homelessness, he chooses to stay at Demarest to look after Lola's brother- a person Yuniór recognizes to be the "only thing she really loved in this world." In fact, years later after Oscar dies and Lola marries a Cuban and Yuniór a "negrita from Salcedo," he reminisces about Oscar with Lola whenever he encounters her in New York City. "All we ever talk about is Oscar," he admits (327).

Additionally, through his connection with Lola, he is able to access accounts of Belicia's tragedies while growing up in the Dominican Republic and some accounts of Abelard's story from Oscar's writings. He also informs that Lola keeps in contact with his mother, who avails to him current information about her life as wife and mother. Needless to say, Yuniór's relationship with her circumscribes the entirety of his story around the question of hetero-love in similar terms to what Díaz calls decolonial love. It is his inability to not violate their love that resonant through the story. In essence, his relationship with Lola is what gives pulse to his story of the de Leon and Cabral family, and makes possible his personal presence and proximity to his characters and to their histories. It also sets the tone by which his gender anxiety maintains a strong frequency throughout the course of the story he tells.

Abelard, Belicia, and Oscar: Thrice Told Tale of Yuniór's Gender Anxieties

The significance of his proximity to the de Leon Cabal family through the failed romantic relationship with Lola is the trajectory it establishes for his stories along the line of the heteronormative

family crisis. Yuniór uses this platform to address what he sees as a crisis in both his own promiscuity and the hypersexual behavior of the typical Dominican male defined in terms quite similar to the crisis detailed in the PROWRA. His recollection of Lola and Oscar's family histories centers principally on either the desire to preserve or the destruction of the heteronormative family units emblematic of America's sense of family institutionalized most saliently during the Fordist era of production and solidified in present-day policies regarding work.¹³ Hence, it is no twist of fate that his stories of Abelard, Belicia, and Oscar all focus on the tragedies they face in obtaining and maintaining heteronormative relationships and family units. Yuniór introduces Abelard as a husband and father, who is unable to protect his family from the Trujillo's "culocracy" and other forms of governance of terror (217). He invents Belicia as an embittered single mother and worker, who desired from a very young age to marry and have children; and he heralds Oscar as a sexually inapt Dominican-male who, after many years of failed attempts at attracting and having a romantic relationship with a woman, finally has one with a semi-retired prostitute. Of Lola, he does not narrate her story unless alongside his own. The chapters in the novel where her story is told, it is narrated in her voice. This break in the narration may indicate the struggle the older Yuniór has with

¹³ The immigrant question for Ford, according to Stephen Meyer III in his historical study of Ford's implementation of the five-dollar work day, in fact, was the source of Ford's problems with labor and his problem with labor was the inability to find and sustain a "disciplined work force" (69). Many of the immigrant families lived in duplexes or single-family homes where several families resided. As a result, the need for work was not as pressing and therefore, many were able to leave a job at-will. Moreover, this cavalier disposition about work effected production according to Ford's theory. Therefore, one of the major schemes to resolve the labor problem, Meyer further informs, "involved the adjustment and adaptation of the immigrant workers to the social and cultural norms of an industrialized America" (68). And in character of that time, this adjustment and adaptation on the shop floors marshaled in the Taylorism form of production and on the home front a social program that required "the middle-class patterns and standards of life- the nuclear family, a pastoral home or cottage for that family, cleanliness in personal and domestic life, thrift, sobriety, traditional morality, family-centered recreation and entertainment" (147). Surveillance was another technique employed by the program. Investigators from the Ford Sociological Department did in-home visits to determine the living conditions of the immigrant worker, and workers were instructed and evaluated on what was considered good living conditions and what was not. In essence, the principal objective of the program sought to secure labor by encouraging, mandating, and even regulating heteronormative lifestyles in the form of monogamous single-family households. Even still today, the labor problem defined by Ford mobilizes social programs in America. Its legacy shows up in the Post-Keynesian economic strategies that took off in 70s to the New Federalism of the Reagan 80s, the dismantling and destructions of welfare in the 90s that still regulate welfare programs to this day and that continuously seek to stratify the family into a heteronormative single-family unit and anchor economic problems with sustaining this structure in the socio-cultural deviancies of various racial and class groups. Subsequently, the logic of the family structure as the root to the problem and crisis with work still exists, and this is why Yuniór's hypersexuality posited between Trujillo's excessive sexual and Oscar's latent sexual behaviors, poses such a problem for him and society.

attesting to Lola's love life away from him. But whatever the case, this is one moment in the novel when he fails to give a witness account to the life of a member of the de León and Cabral family. While it has fostered much speculation among critics, what we know to be true is he fails to witness her life without him in it.

On the other hand, what he does witness he attests to through a meta-commentary approach. The essence of this approach is to not only observe and share the tragic events that make up the stories of Abelard, Belicia, and Oscar, but to tell the audience how to read the recollection of the events. He does this by inscribing and commenting upon the innermost thoughts and emotion of Abelard, Belicia, and Oscar and this serves to further direct a reading of his story. Basically, he polices the truths and emotions of the stories. Of course, such a strategy finds justification in analyses of literary devices within conventions of immigrant literature that are said to bring to life the stories of those once silenced. Yet, when we consider the distress and uneasiness Yunior has regarding his sexuality, specifically, as it relates to his sexual behaviors and role; the efforts to demonstrate a modulation of it between the sexual polarities of Trujillo and Oscar (i.e. hyper/aggressive and passive); the relationship of Yunior and Lola that frames his entire story; and, the focus on the subject characters through issues that complicate heteronormative relationships and family, then perhaps the policing of the reading of the innermost thoughts of Abelard, Belicia, and Oscar does a bit more than what the conventions of immigrant literature generally suggest. In fact, I argue, this strategy gives place to a form of universalism by which Yunior inculcate on a Dominican past a sense of normative anticipations, anxieties, and fears indicative of his own concerns with hypersexuality. The Abelard story gives such an example.

The Tragedy of Abelard Luis Cabral, or the First Tale of Yunior's Gender Anxiety

For Díaz's Yunior, Abelard Luis Cabral's (Oscar and Lola's maternal grandfather) story plays a particular role in his attempts to localize his promiscuity and characterize his sexuality. Of Abelard's story, Yunior shares what he believes should be a well-known history of the rapacity of Trujillo and the effect of Trujillo's ravenous sexual behavior on the sanctity of family. According to Yunior, Trujillo, "acted like it [the Dominican Republic] was his very own plantation, acted like he owned everything and everyone, killed whomever he wanted to kill, sons, brothers, fathers, mothers, took women away from their husbands on their wedding nights and then would brag publicly about 'the great honeymoon' he'd had the night before"

(225). In the chapter titled, “Poor Abelard 1944-1946,” Yunior recalls how Trujillo’s acts and behavior directly impacted Abelard and ultimately, led to his death. Even as Yunior acknowledges that Abelard’s tragedy is cloaked in as much mystery as other tales of terror of the Trujillo’s rule; he nonetheless, shares a story that tells of Abelard as a prominent doctor and scholar in the Dominican Republic during Trujillo’s reign, who tries to stay as far from the politics of the country as possible.

In the story, Yunior recalls that Abelard, like many men in the Dominican Republic, was asked to bring his wife, Socorro and daughter, Jacquelyn, to one of Trujillo’s parties and to introduce them to the dictator, also known as “the Number-One Bellaco in the Country. Believed that all the toto in the DR was, literally his” (217). Recalling the legend, Yunior recites how Abelard’s reluctance and ultimate refusal to fulfill Trujillo’s request caused him great panic, and how when drinking one night he asked a few of his friends to help move a piece of furniture from the roof of his car to the truck, making a joke in the process about bodies not being in his truck in reference to Trujillo’s reputation. The result of this joking, according to the legend Yunior recalls, was the detainment, torture, and death of Abelard while in police custody. Despite all this, Yunior still alludes that the real reason behind the fate of Abelard directly relates to his failure to make the women in his household available to the rapacious whims of the dictator. He explains:

Abelard, instead of bringing his wife and daughter to Jefe events, as custom dictated, began to make a point of leaving them at home. He explained to his friends that his wife had become “nervous” and that Jacquelyn took care of her but the real reason for the absences was Trujillo’s notorious rapacity and his daughter Jacquelyn’s off-the-hook looks...She had caught a serious case of the hips-ass-chest, a condition which during the mid-forties spelled trouble with a capital T to the R to the U to the J to the illo. (216)

Yunior asserts in this passage that Abelard began leaving his family at home to avoid the possibility of being cuckold or being a father of a molested daughter. According to Yunior he used the excuse that his wife was ill and that his daughter, Jacquelyn, looked after her in order to circumvent the power and sexual belligerence of the dictator over his family. For this reason, Yunior surmises that Abelard began to take a political stance against Trujillo, assuming it was as much for their protection as it was his position to uphold his family. According to Yunior, this was quite unlike many of the men of Abelard’s statue. For unlike Abelard, many men did avail the women of their families to Trujillo’s sexual programs. Yunior testifies:

It’s a well-documented fact that in Trujillo’s DR if you were of a certain class and you put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe, within the week she’d be mamando his ripio like an old pro and *there would be nothing you could do about it...* So common was the practice, so insatiable

Trujillo's appetites, that there were plenty of men in the nation, *hombres de calidad y posicion*, who believe it or not, offered up their daughters freely to the Failed Cattle Thief. (217)

Hence, according to Yuniór, Abelard's failure to make such an offer and steadfast duplicity in not availing the women in his family to Trujillo's sexual whims sealed his awful fate. He notes, "Let's be honest, though. The rap about The Girl Trujillo Wanted is a pretty common one on the Island...Trujillo took your houses, your properties, put your pops and your moms in jail? Well, it was because he wanted to fuck the beautiful daughter of the house! And your family wouldn't let him!" (244). Albeit to say, the culture of rape to which Díaz refers in Yuniór's story of Abelard Cabral includes more than the sexual domination of the woman on the Island, but the vicious plunder and violent seizure of the family unit under a rapacious patriarchal rule.

So, why is the plunder of the family important to the Yuniór's story of the de Leon and Cabral family and why does this plunder shadows Yuniór's "compulsive promiscuity" as Díaz terms it (398)? Plunder in an immediate reading of the novel seems to locate a history that fosters for the diasporic Dominican male a gender anxiety embedded in his sense of masculinity. Undoubtedly, Yuniór's memory of a Dominican Republic under Trujillo connotes a kind of masculinity that seeks the social order of a family unit, as in the case of that of Abelard's: a family with a husband to one woman – but not excluding a mistress- and a father of three daughters. However, masculinity, according to Yuniór's memory, also looms under a dominant national agenda that makes it complicit in the violation of women and property (and true to modernity, the pairing of women and property here is not coincidental. Both historically represent forms of fecundity that are necessary for the reproduction of the idea of masculine vigor). It also connotes one that is shaped by excessive confidence and cognition in regard to attracting and copulating with countless women and thus, pillaging their love even to the detriment of corrupting intimacy, love, and connectedness. Plunder in this sense proves quite significant to the contradiction that outlines Yuniór's promiscuity by which we see his gender anxiety as it registers in his hypersexuality and establishes a masculinity through which he attempts to authenticate his Dominican-ness.

To this end, although Yuniór mentions other causes for Abelard's fall including Trujillo's desire to acquire the Cabral family wealth in the form of land, houses, and businesses or the mystical book that Abelard is believed to have written about Trujillo (which along with all his other writings were never located); it is the threat against Socorro and Jacquelyn that proves most significant to him and furnishes

for him access to Abelard's innermost thoughts and fears, which arguably gives language to his efforts in tempering his behavior. For example, Yuniur recounts an evening of one of Trujillo parties, when Abelard decides, after looking at his daughter, that he would not bring them along to the party. Yuniur informs:

He just knew. Knew he just couldn't do it. Told his wife to forget about it. Said same to daughter. Ignored their horrified protestations. Jumped in the car, picked up Marcus, and headed to the party.

What about Jacquelyn? Marcus asked.

She's not coming.

Marcus shook his head. Said nothing else.

At the reception line Trujillo again paused before Abelard. Sniffed the air like a cat. And your wife and daughter?

Abelard trembling but holding it together somehow. Already sensing how everything was going to change. My apologies, Your Excellency. They could not attend.

His porcine eyes narrowed. So I see, he said coldly, and then dismissed Abelard with a flick of his wrist.

Not even Marcus would look at him....

Not four weeks after the party, Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral was arrested by the Secret Police. The charge? "Slander and gross calumny against the Person of the President." (232-3)

Deftly, Yuniur recounts the moment Abelard faces Trujillo after disobeying the general orders of the Presidency to bring one's wife and daughter to meet him. He describes the brief and sharp exchange between Trujillo and Abelard and the ways Abelard struggled internally as he stands before the creator of his doom. Yuniur recalls how Abelard was trying to hold it together even as he was trembling before Trujillo and how, subsequently, he sensed in that moment a change was coming. The intimacy of Yuniur's recollection of this moment in Abelard's life is miraculous, considering also that the truthfulness of the event Yuniur recounts seems inconsequential to the purpose of him recounting the story, as evident in the following line, "If the stories are to be believed, it all had to do with a joke," alluding to the possibility of this event never occurring (233). In contrast, what appear consequential in Yuniur's narration of the possible moment of Abelard's fall are Abelard's inner thoughts and emotions. If we take a close look at the passage, Yuniur details only the tangible responses of the other characters. For example, Abelard's wife and daughter protested; Marcus asked a question, shook his head, and later did not look at Abelard; and Trujillo asked about Socorro and Jacquelyn, narrowed his eyes, spoke coldly, and flicked his wrist. Of Abelard, on the other hand, Yuniur witnesses the ethereal: Abelard knew something; he was trembling but trying to hold it together, and sensing things (233). In essence, Yuniur discloses the inner thoughts and feelings of Abelard, the things that are intangible, to recount the event.

Why make this distinction? If he knew what Abelard was thinking, why did he not know what the other characters in this story thought or felt as well? If we look again to Monica Hanna's assertion of his writerly manipulation, then perhaps, we can say that he uses this technique "to make the readers feel complicit, while still insisting on the overall truthfulness of the story" (93). Still, considering he offers to the reader the possibility that this story is feigned, it stands to reason that he really does not seek to tell a true history or to get the readers to believe this is a true story of Abelard's life experience in the Dominican Republic under Trujillo's rule as much as he seeks to conceptualize the inner thoughts and feelings of a man whose family is facing a calamity. We must also weight in here Yuniór's account of the subsequent events after Abelard's encounter with Trujillo. According to the information Yuniór gathers and shares, Socorro dies shortly after giving birth to their last child, Belicia; Jacquelyn and Astrid also die while in the care of some of their father's family members after their mother's death; and Belicia gets taken away by members of her mother's family and sold to a family in outer Azua where she is abused and enslaved. All the while, Abelard sits in prison to die some fourteen years later after the event. Each and every one of the accounts Yuniór gives of the events following Abelard's final encounter with Trujillo point to the destruction of Abelard's family. And the reasons for the awful fate do the same. Whether the awful fate was the result of Abelard failing to allow Trujillo access to his wife and daughter, telling a questionable joke, possessing wealth that Trujillo wanted or writing a book about Trujillo's mystical powers, the destruction of the Cabral family under a leader known for excessive, compulsive, and aggressive sexual behavior seemed inevitable. Even as Yuniór admits, "[O]n all matters related to Abelard's imprisonment and to the subsequent destruction of the clan there is within the family a silence that stands monuments to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction. A whisper here and there but nothing more," the universality of the fears and anxieties that Yuniór ascribes to Abelard shore up for Yuniór a credible narrative of Abelard and his family's destruction by El Jefe and his Trujillatos (243). For this reason, I surmise, the witnessing act of Abelard's encounter with Trujillo, which included Yuniór's ability to know and describe Abelard's internal responses appear not so miraculous as it does dubious and not simply because Yuniór lends doubt to the truthfulness of the stories he recounts, but because his recollection fails to make clear if the thoughts he shares are really Abelard's or his own. If we recall, it was Díaz who informed us that Yuniór was at one and the same time a victim and beneficiary of a rape

culture. Along those lines, we have determined that Yuniór's recollection of Trujillo's rapacious sexual behavior served to denounce the complicity of the tradition of Dominican masculinity in the violation of women and property- a complicity that has appeared to follow Dominican men throughout the Dominican Diaspora. All of this proves significant to the undercurrent idea of the story as Yuniór attempts to police the information he shares in order to direct the audience's attention to a hypersexuality rooted to a legacy of terror and destruction and the effects it has on the security of the family unit. Therefore, the conceptualization of Abelard's inner thoughts and feelings of anxiety, fear, and woeful anticipation allow Yuniór to remember a past that generates for him a platform in the present aimed at illustrating in the Dominican Diaspora a masculinity troubled by behaviors that potentially produce the absentee father and/or crisis in the Dominican American family. Lest we forget, in Yuniór's version of the story, once Abelard was removed from the family, the family was utterly destroyed. In no way am I suggesting a clear-cut correlation between Abelard's tragedy and Yuniór's life. For by the end of his story, Yuniór boasts of reaching the middle-class status: being married, possessing a stable and prestigious job, and owning a home. It does, however, reveal a possible fear Yuniór has regarding his current life status and the potential threat hypersexuality poses to this status. More directly, it demonstrates Yuniór's push back against his own vows and maybe even fears of being a typical Dominican American male, whose hypersexual behavior constitute his Dominican-ness and which, if left unchecked, will lead him back to a life when his compulsive promiscuity destroys the Latin-American middle class status he has obtained and the hetero-normative family he currently possesses.

Belicia Unashamed, or the Second Tale of Yuniór's Gender Anxiety

Yuniór's policing of the inner thoughts and emotions in his narration of the Cabral family fukú erupts most pervasively in his story of Belicia (or Beli as he refers to her). He recounts her tragedies during the time she resided in the Dominican Republic and contextualizes them within her search for hetero-love and family. Similar to his narration of Abelard Luis Cabral, he invokes normative anticipations, anxieties, and fears to invent a memory of Belicia's youth, which provides for him a platform to mediate his gender anxiety regarding his hypersexuality. Furthermore, he polices her story by employing an all-encompassing first, second, and third person perspective to recall the events that led to her eventual diasporic journey to Paterson, New Jersey. Specifically, in the chapter titled, "The Three Heartbreaks of

Belicia Cabral 1955-1962,” he uses this all-encompassing perspective, which takes its most prominent shape in the possessive tenor of, “our girl” in reference to Beli, to give credence to his meta-commentary approach in instructing the reader what to infer about the specific events he recounts concerning her history. In addition, he employs it as a way to direct questions to the Beli of the history he remembers about critical moments in her life experiences that he recalls and invents (keeping in mind here that the Beli of Yunior’s story is a figure in his larger narration about Oscar and a configuration of his memory in his historical imagining of a Dominican Republic long past). Of note, the dynamism of his all-encompassing approach or, rather, pervasiveness into Beli’s story could tempt a reading of it as a narrative that demonstrates the silencing of Beli- a silencing that allows him to “attain narrative mastery over another who cannot possibly make known her story,” as one critic claims. Yet, despite my concerns with Yunior’s policing of her story, I offer that such a reading would be a little misguided given that this kind of claim assumes that Yunior, as narrator, is “deeply entangled” in Beli’s history of trauma (Sepulveda 29). In taking that position, one would have to also assume that Yunior’s narration is somehow moving into the realm of the “real,” which invokes a kind of reading Chandra warns against.¹⁴ Granted, Yunior’s pervasiveness into or narrative mastery over Beli’s story definitely demonstrates that she is “not one who writes the self” and that “she figures as a marker or token of power that gives value to Yunior’s masculinity while simultaneously enabling him to occupy his authorial position as the mouthpiece to her trauma, her body, and her family’s history,” which I argue is significant to a reading of it in relation to the narrative act of witnessing (ibid). But, it does not mean that it produces a conflict with Beli’s history, as if Beli having authored her own story would get us closer to a “real” picture of her history. Yunior’s story from the start is a memory within the aesthetic mediation of fiction and thus, the story he tells of Beli is one that he makes up as much as he remembers. In fact, he writes, “Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell” (*TBLW* 7). In this sense, he tells us his book (including his story of Beli) is a conjuring of sorts within mystic spaces of a narrative contrary to, we can only assume, the stories of the de León and Cabral family’s (and here, specifically, of Beli’s) curse

¹⁴ See Sarika Chandra’s *Dislocalism: The Crisis of Globalization and the Remobilizing of Americanism*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011.

and doom that he gathers from Lola's stories, Oscar's writings, and other family members' legends. Therefore, Yuniór's story of Beli, even as it relates her traumatic history, should be read in terms of Yuniór's historical memory and imagination.

Under these considerations, the pervasiveness of Yuniór's narration into Beli's story helps us to see it not through the conflict of who is telling the story, but how his telling of her story aids in establishing a proximity to notions of shamelessness in relation to his own gender anxieties that reflect the normative anticipation, anxieties, and fears through which he remembers the Dominican history. He does this by drawing great emphasis on the shamelessness Beli displays in the various scandalous affairs he recalls her having while in search for love. Beli's ideas of love, in Yuniór's descriptions, are quite identifiable with the hetero-normative familial order of America's tradition of family within its social reproductions of work. Her chief desires, according to the story Yuniór tells, are to marry a rich man and have children.

He begins his story by recalling her adolescent years when she lived in Baní with her father's favorite cousin, La Inca. He leaves the telling of her present history to her daughter Lola, who narrates a story in the first-person point of view that configures Beli as a workaholic and bad-tempered mother just finding out that she has breast cancer, and of her past before living with La Inca to the outer realms of ambiguity and silence on behest of Beli and La Inca. Of Beli's younger years beginning at the age of thirteen, Yuniór narrates a story of a reckless teenager's shameless search for love in a time when the Dominican Republic was under Trujillo's rule. Yuniór gives special attention to two traumatic events in Beli's history to demonstrate the shamelessness of her early years. First, he discusses the scandal she has with a rich boy name Jack Pujols while in the private school, El Redentor. Second, he recalls the lascivious affair she has with the Gangsta, who also is Trujillo's brother-in-law.

The first series of events he recollects begins when La Inca retrieves Beli from her abusive foster family in outer Azua, brings Beli home to raise her as her child, enrolls her in a private school, and employs her at her bakery. Yuniór informs that while at the private school, Beli gets embroiled in a scandalous affair with Jack Pujols, "the school's handsomest (read: whitest) boy" (89), who also figured into Beli's dreams of marrying "*a handsome wealthy man,*" given that Jack "was the number-one son of the Blessed B---í clan, one of Baní's most venerable (and filthy rich) family" (100). Yuniór notes how Beli was not sexually aggressive toward Jack at first and how this soon changed with the transformation of her

physical appearance. Yuniór acknowledges that at first Beli was a bit subconscious about the transformation, consigning it to “the feelings that gets delivered to you by the bucket for free during adolescence: shame” (92). He later notes that Beli’s shame turned quickly into shamelessness with the matriculation of her body the summer of her thirteenth year. Beli, according to Yuniór, not only lacked a sense of modesty about her transformation; but, she also understood the power of her sexuality contrary to her former shame. He surmises that she “ran into the future that her new body represented and never ever looked back” (94). Yuniór uses her lack of modesty and adolescence shame to transition to the story of Beli’s rather terse relationship with Jack; a relationship that ends abruptly when Beli and Jack are caught having sex in the school’s closet. Yuniór attributes the blame Beli faced for the entirety of the situation to be either the effect of her blackness, which historically has close ties to a colonial ideology of the hypersexualized black woman; or the effect of Jack’s whiteness that gets exonerated in the colonial narrative of sexual violence. Yet, what stands out most conspicuously to Yuniór is the shamelessness Beli exhibits when she gets blamed for the event, which seems to him to be a step beyond just the lack of modesty regarding her looks. Of the moment she is caught having sex with Jack Pujols in the school’s closet and of Jack’s betrayal in blaming her for seducing him, Yuniór writes, “Pujols might have been a bitch-ass rat, but Beli’s reaction was one for the history books. Not only was our girl not embarrassed by what had happened, even after being shaken down by the rector and the nun and the janitor, a holy triple-team, she absolutely refused to profess her guilt!” (101). In this passage, Yuniór recalls Beli’s refusal to profess her guilt and obvious lack of remorse for her behavior. This seems to jar Yuniór even more than Jack’s cowardice for denying any culpability in their encounter or for placing all the blame on Beli, which is made most obvious by the exclamation point he uses after writing “she absolutely refused to profess her guilt!” Indeed, it is the shamelessness of Beli’s attitude regarding her behavior that draws Yuniór deeper into her story. He begins to use pejorative descriptions in his narration of the events that followed. For example, when recounting the time Beli is expelled from the private school for having sex with Jack in the school’s closet, Yuniór scornfully indexes it as her normal pattern of behavior and inscribes it to her steadfastness in denying guilt. He writes acrimoniously, “In typical Beli fashion our girl insisted that she’d done nothing wrong, that, in fact, she was well within her rights” (sic 101). He follows this by quoting Beli directly; although, it is not clear if he is purporting to repeat what she states directly, what Lola or others

conjure up for him in their recollection of this moment in Beli's life, or what he imagines her to say. Whichever the case, he writes, "I'm allowed to do anything I want, Beli said stubbornly, with my husband" (101). By quoting Beli's stubborn proclamation, Yuniór attempts to redirect her traumatic experience at El Redentor away from Jack's false promise to marry her. He also uses it to divert attention away from her victimhood to a legacy of Dominican hypersexuality, despite his own pontification over her physical transformation in which he asserts that she went from "being a gangly ibis of a girl" to "an underage stunner," noting that "[e]ven [he the]... humble Watcher, reviewing her old pictures, is struck by what a fucking babe she was" and that "if Trujillo had not been on his last erections he probably would have gunned for her like he'd rumored to have gunned for her poor dead sister" (91-2). Instead, he blames her trauma on the fault of her steadfastness to be unashamed, expressed in the proclamation, "I'm allowed to do anything I want...with my husband."

He continues to blame the fault of her traumas on her shamelessness by recalling the affair she has with the Gangsta. He recalls that this affair began while Beli worked at the Peking Palacio restaurant, sometime after the scandal with Jack and her expulsion from and refusal to return to school. He recounts that while working there, Beli and her coworker would go to a nightclub after work and that this is where she would first meet the Gangsta. He notes that Beli was still quite young and was still dazzled by the dream of marriage and family. Thus, her meeting and subsequent affair with the Gangsta, according to Yuniór, appears to Beli as the possible fulfillment of her dreams of marrying a handsome wealthy man. The Gangsta, from the legend Yuniór calls up, is an affluent older man who works in Trujillo's secret police. He adorns Beli with expensive gifts and promises of a family; and she falls for the Gangsta and his promises naively. For Yuniór, Beli's issue is not that she was promiscuous. He insists, "Turns out that in her heart our girl was more Penelope than Whore of Babylon" (109). According to Yuniór, Beli had a "pure uncut unadulterated love," for the Gangsta. The problem with this affair for Yuniór is the shamelessness she exhibits while in the relationship. He recalls how Beli's relationship with the Gangsta began to tarnish her reputation, stating admonishingly, "Our girl no longer maintained even a modicum of respectability at home" (128). He tells how she began to stay out all night and how this was viewed negatively and suspiciously by the old-timers he interviewed years after Beli left the Dominican Republic. He reports, "Old-timers have told me that during her last months in the DR Beli spent more time inside the love motels

than she had in school.” He remarks further that this could have been an exaggeration, but that it also shaped her reputation as a *cuero* (or slut in English translation) (127). What made matters worse, according to Yunior, is Beli’s attitude. He recounts how she demonstrated a lack of remorse about her relationship and new position as *cuero*. He recalls that Beli lost her job at the Peking Palacio because of her behavior and that when La Inca questioned her about the relationship with the Gangsta, reminding Beli of earlier plans to go to college to become a respectable doctor like her father and pondering if Beli’s behavior was an indication of the rumored curse so many people suspected to haunt the Cabral family, she responded with laughter. He informs, “Beli laughed” and retorted to La Inca, “You might be cursed, but not me” to demonstrate yet again her shameless disregard for the effects of her actions (128).

What seems to trouble Yunior most is the magnitude of her shamelessness, when she is faced with the most shameful and tragic experiences. He recalls that during the course of her many rendezvous with the Gangsta Beli gets pregnant; and, against the warnings of La Inca, she informs the Gangsta, who wants her to get rid of it (although the older Beli chooses not to remember this fact, according to Yunior). To Yunior’s chagrin, she continues the affair with the Gangsta and is soon apprehended by henchmen commissioned by the Gangsta’s wife, who also is Trujillo’s sister. Yunior, again, points out Beli’s lack of remorse when he recounts the time she was taken to a cane field and beaten mercilessly. He remarks, “Our girl, she kept flinging her head to get her hair out of her face, could think only about her poor little boy, and that was the sole reason she started to weep” (147). Beli survives the beating and Yunior contributes it to a supernatural presence of a mongoose that spared Beli from the ultimate effect of the *fukú*: death. However, he informs that she lost her unborn child and her relationship with the Gangsta. Much to Yunior’s amazement, Beli’s responds in laughter. And again, she laughs when La Inca’s advises her to leave the country for safety after the beating. To this, Yunior questions her directly and admonishingly, asking her most reproachingly:

Oh, Beli [...] What did you know about states or diasporas? What did you know about Neuba Yol or unheated “old law” tenements or children whose self-hate short-circuited their minds? What did you know, madame, about *immigration*? Don’t laugh, mi negrita, for your world is about to be changed. You laugh because you’ve been ransacked to the limit of your soul, because your lover betrayed you almost unto death, because your first son was neverborn. You laugh because you have no front teeth and you’ve sworn never to smile again.

I wish I could say different but I’ve got it right here on tape. La Inca told you you had to leave the country and you laughed.

End of story. (160)

Here, he poses his question directly to the Beli of the specific history he recounts as if she is available in his present history, even though he has informed the reader that she dies before his book is completed. He admonishes her for laughing at her past misfortunes and for being ignorant of the hardships she will face in the future. His reproach addresses the shamelessness of her behavior that frames much of his story of her. In effect, his indictment of her laughter illustrates the ways his witnessing allows him in his present history to position his personal presence in her past to hold her accountable to speak her guilt and her shame. Of course, she never does it, nor is she able to do it. But to what it does give place is the necessity for admission of guilt and shame that legitimizes his staging of his witness to her story as he tries to come to terms with his own hypersexuality.

To understand this and the reason Yunior seeks her admission of guilt or shame, I turn again briefly to the PROWRA. In this instance, I look to the signing ceremony of the Act. Jerry Watts, in his article, "The End of Work and the End of Welfare," reminds us how black women were paraded in the White House to attest to their joy of breaking free from programs that required the state and capital to be *responsible* for some of the cost of social reproduction. He writes:

In the Republican welfare reform bill of 1995, which serves as the basis of the Personal Responsibility Act, black Americans were explicitly identified as the morally fallen (crime rates, out-of-wedlock births, teen pregnancy). At the White House signing ceremony, President Clinton was flanked by several black women and their children. These black women spoke at the ceremony, weaving narratives of how wonderful it felt when they escaped the demoralizing clutches of welfare. These women, unbeknownst to themselves, essentially proclaimed themselves morally healed" ("The End of Work and the End of Welfare," 409).

Of course, the idea of being morally healed carries its antithesis of being morally deficient or sick. What Watts avails in this passage is exactly this antithesis and hence, the tainted logic that necessitates women of color (and in more specific racialized terms, Black women) to proclaim their moral deficiency and the need for their moral restoration. Yet, if we consider the correlation between Yunior's ideas of his hypersexuality and the rhetoric of the Act represented in the display of these women that Watts describes, then arguably one could read Yunior's struggles with Beli's shamelessness regarding her experiences precisely in her inability to proclaim her moral deficiency or the need for a moral restoration. To put another way, for Yunior, she fails to demonstrate shame or remorse for her experiences, which seems important to notions of responsibility and the need to self-regulate oneself according to American

middle-class values. Of course, my point here is not to marginalize what this novel brings to the memory and imagining of a Dominican history that may be otherwise overlooked. For when we consider the story closely, we see that Yunior gives a narrative about a young Dominican girl made victim to a rapacious and negligent masculinity constructed in a legacy of a Trujillo ruled Dominican Republic that in the memory of Yunior holds no regard to the terrors it imparts onto the women and the family structure writ large. Moreover, we are privy to his story of her search for love and family plotted in his recollection of the Dominican Republic that he uses to direct a view of her experiences as also a product of specific conditions of the social, cultural, and political order of a Dominican Republic past. However, the proximity Díaz writes Yunior to her story as a Latin-American, who has acquired the accouterments of America's middle class, arguably makes this story not just a traditional immigrant narrative that tells of a "back there to over here," but one that is specifically "immigration to the U.S." More precisely, it is an immigrant narrative that gives Yunior a platform to invent and confirm an identity specifically American. Thus, it may not be too far-reaching to consider the signing ceremony of the PROWRA when thinking about why Yunior requires Beli to admit her shame, even as he wrestles with his own anxieties. For his witness to her shamelessness and his struggle with her refusal to admit guilt appears to be very much in line with the logic that governed the enactment and implementation of the Act itself. It also seems to align with routes of assimilation through which admission of guilt and shame expresses a form of self-regulation, and for Yunior, an expression that allows him to regulate his hypersexuality, which in turn he uses to invent and sustain his middle-class Latino-American status.

Love and the Accursed Oscar Wao, or the Third Tale of Yunior's Gender Anxiety

Employing the same strategy of witnessing used in his story of Abelard and Belicia, Yunior recalls the tragedies of Oscar, the tragic hero of his story and the character he positions himself against in his attempts to address his gender anxieties. Yunior's witnessing act in the telling of Oscar's story is only slightly different in that he establishes a proximity that places him in eye and earshot to Oscar's experience. As I pointed out early, one of the ways he does this is by positioning himself as Oscar's sister's boyfriend, and another way is by posturing a benevolent presence in Oscar's life as a "fixer," specifically during their college years, when he "got him [Oscar] to swear off the walking up to strange girls with his I-love-you-craziness...got him to start watching his diet and to stop talking crazy negative"

(sic 176). Using this same proximity, he also bears witness to Oscar's numerous failures with the "fixing" project and the emotional effect of those failures. Even in times when he recalls rarely seeing Oscar, he still places himself in eye or earshot to the events Oscar face. One such example is when Oscar returned to the Dominican Republic after being beaten by the capitán, whose semi-prostitute girlfriend he befriended. Yuniór shares that he went to the Dominican Republic to convince Oscar to return home and gives a witness account to Oscar's stubborn refusal.

However, in keeping true to the narrative form of witnessing employed in his other accounts, he pushes the boundaries of eye witnessing further to police the memory he invents concerning the events that lead to Oscar's demise and the innermost thoughts and emotions of Oscar. He employs this technique in his account of Oscar's early years before attending Rutgers, but it is in his final days that Yuniór's policing of Oscar's story appears most poignant. Returning for a moment to Yuniór's recount of the beating Oscar suffered at the command of the capitán during his first return visit to the Dominican Republic after many years, we are informed that Oscar befriends and, in typical Oscar fashion, falls in love with Ybón Pimentel, a semi-retired prostitute, who also had ties to the Dominican Republic police force. Yuniór notes that Oscar's love for Ybón seems more intense than his past experiences with love, simply because she is the first woman he engages sexually. Yuniór recalls the first occurrence of their sexual engagement happens when Oscar drives Ybón home, who, at the time, is too intoxicated to drive. Yuniór recounts that Oscar was pulled over by Ybón's boyfriend along with two other officers and that Ybón at that very moment wakes up and starts kissing Oscar. Even though Yuniór has hinted in his story of Oscar and Ybón that such an encounter with the capitán would be devastating for Oscar; Yuniór still takes time to recall how Oscar felt in that moment. He states, "The first feel of a woman's body pressing against yours-who among us can ever forget that? And that first real kiss- well, to be honest, I've forgotten both of these first, but Oscar never would" (293). What is so striking about this passage is that even as Yuniór admits to have forgotten his first intimate encounters, thereby, eliminating any possibility of linking the memory of this moment to his own personal experiences, he is still able to give a witness account to the affect of this kiss and the feel of Ybón's body in Oscar's memory. He pushes his witness account further by recalling that, "For a second he [Oscar] was in disbelief," and he remembers that Oscar thought, "This is it, this is really it!" Next, Yuniór recites in graphic details the actual kiss. He describes,

“Her lips plush and pliant, and her tongue pushing into his mouth. And then there were lights all around them and he thought I’m going to transcend!” Next, speaking in Oscar’s voice, he writes, “Transcendence is miiine!” (294). The significance of this passage to Yuniór’s witness act of Oscar’s story is that it demonstrates how Yuniór conceptualizes Oscar’s vulnerability and naivety when it comes to love. He describes Oscar’s love as a reckless form of naivety that causes him to be careless and blind even in the face of danger. This is most evident in the immediacy by which Yuniór follows this transcending moment with details about the ruthless beating Oscar suffered, the subsequent vigorous request of Oscar’s family (his mother in particular whose experience was quite similar) for him to return to the U.S., Oscar’s clandestine return to the Dominican Republic, and his relentless pursuit of Ybón that ultimately results in his murder.

To Yuniór, Oscar’s desperate desire and ultimate death for love makes him a tragic hero, one who tries even unto death to experience an uncensored and unregulated love. He is a warning for Yuniór, so to speak, that signals a form of sexual latency that must be avoided even as Yuniór simultaneously tries to wrestle his sexuality from the norms of Dominican masculinity influenced by memory of a rapacious dictator. In sum, Oscar’s unyielding love for Ybón, a woman whose profession challenges the idea of heteronormative and committal love, ties directly to what Yuniór sees as Oscar’s sexual latency. Thus, it is safe to say that Yuniór does not find absolution in his story of Oscar’s desires and search for or failures with love, given the polarity Yuniór sets regarding the legacy of Trujillo’s sexual rapacity and Oscar’s sexual latency. For as much as the Trujillo of Yuniór’s story complicates his sense of Dominican-ness in relation to his sexuality as a middle-class Latino-American male, so too does Oscar in his insatiable desire for heterosexual love. Rather, if we recall Díaz’s discussion about Yuniór being both an aggressor in and victim of the rape culture of which Trujillo is remembered; then perhaps, his story of Oscar could be read as his attempt to address his own distress and uneasiness with his sexual behaviors and roles in relation to his own complications with love. However, it may not be for the reasons Yuniór knows or for the reasons we think. Considering what Friedrich Engels tells us nearly 150 years ago, monogamous relationships are developed from economic conditions and are in essence bourgeois. While they appear to symbolize love and devotion, they function as something quite different in our society. Hence, what was the fault of Oscar in the story is that he tells the truth about love. He falls for a woman

who sells her body out for hire as opposed to marrying a woman whose body is sold into slavery once for all (or until the divorce) (Engels 80). It is not through matrimony that he is able to love a woman; rather, it is outside of it. Thus, for the sake of Yuniór's salvation, he has to die. Plainly put, Oscar's crime is that he was unable to self-regulate to legitimize his relationship with the prostitute. He loved her unregulated, which according to Yuniór's story, led to his demise.

The Self-Regulated Dominican Male Hypersexuality

And the need to regulate sexuality, indeed, is one of the most significant elements of Yuniór's story as he attempts to legitimize his marriage, especially when we consider the redundancy he employs in criticizing his own indiscriminate sexual encounters and inability to secure a stable relationship with the love of his life, Lola. Being both victim and beneficiary of a rape culture seems the same side of a coin when we follow the story he tells of his troubles with his hypersexuality. He remembers the three nights he spends intimately although not sexually with Lola, who nursed him to health after being severely beaten by a group of "fucking morenos" while walking home from the Roxy at 2 a.m. (167). He recalls, "[O]nly Lola came fucking through. Heard about the beatdown from my boy Melvin and shot over ASAP [...] She was the one who took care of my sorry ass. Cooked, cleaned, picked up my classwork, got me medicine, even made sure I showered" (sic 16). The moment of intimacy he reminisces illustrates a sense of closeness with Lola beyond sexual intercourse and this experience proves troubling to the Yuniór. He admits:

Even those nights after I got jumped she wouldn't let me steal on her ass for nothing. So you can *sleep* in my bed but you can't sleep *with* me?
Yo soy prieta, Yuni, she said, pero no soy bruta.
Knew exactly what kind of sucio I was. (169)

The problem for Yuniór, according to his own admission, outside the immediate desire for a sexual engagement with Lola, is the promiscuous reputation he remembers she believes him to have: "Knew exactly what kind of sucio I was." What proves even more problematic for him is his inability to discontinue the behavior that Lola's discerns: "Two days after we broke up saw me hitting on one of her line-sisters and turned her long back to me" (169).

This tone of deprecation continues in his recollection of the various relationships he has while at Rutgers and it appears most prominent alongside his memory of attempting to make Oscar more Dominican in behavior and appearance. When recalling advising Oscar on the appropriate Dominican

way to approach women, he thinks back to a terrible experience he has after getting caught cheating on his girlfriend, Suriyan: "So what happens at the beginning of October? What always happens to playboys like me. I got bopped. No surprise, given how balls-out I was living. Wasn't just any bop either. My girl Suriyan found out I was messing with one of hermanas" (sic 175). While this moment nudges him to consider slowing down his hypersexual behavior or rather, to adjust it; he also recalls how such a choice for him at that time when he still considers himself the standard form of masculinity for Oscar complicates his Dominican-ness. And when Oscar does befriend a girl that he recalls once trying and failing to date, he contemplates:

I should have been happy for the Wao (a derogatory name Oscar gains while at college), I mean, honestly, who was I to begrudge Oscar a little action... But of course I begrudged the motherfucker. A heart like mine, which never got any kind of affection growing up, is terrible above all things. Was then, is now. Instead of encouraging him, I scowled when I saw him with La Jablesse; instead of sharing my women wisdom I told him to watch himself- in other words I was a player hater. (185-6)

In this passage, his self-deprecation leads him to pin his problem with hypersexuality to the lack of affection during his formative years of development. The lack of affection not only invokes a jealousy toward Oscar for his repeated attempts to experience intimate love; but also, constitutes a Dominican-ness that restrains intimacy and obstructs commitments to hetero-normative monogamous relationship.

Elsewhere, in the novel, this same self-deprecation leads him to fault his Dominican-ness for Lola's decision to terminate her pregnancy: "[Lola] had been pregnant once, a real moment of excitement, but she aborted it because I was cheating on her with some girl (269). In this short sentence, Yunior tells the reader that not only did his hypersexual behavior create a child born out of wedlock; but, it also leads to the destruction of his unborn child. He admits that this behavior does not cease until "ten years to the day." He confesses that he "went through more lousy shit than you could imagine, was lost for a good long while- no Lola, no me, no nothing – until finally I woke up next to somebody I didn't give two shits about, my upper lip covered in coke-snot and coke-blood and I said, OK, Wao, OK. You win" (325). At this point, he appears to tug on Oscar's latency as a stable hold to help pull him out the hole of his hypersexual life. However, the death of Oscar for the love of a Dominican prostitute does not allow for such a stable hold. Rather, Oscar avails to Yunior sites of recovery fortified in the internal self, through which he works out the fukú stories of the de León and Cabral family as well as his own in an effort to demonstrate the regulation and discipline of his hypersexuality.

Conclusion

What does Wao win, according to Yuniór? It is not clear; however, we find out by the end of the novel that not only does Yuniór work at Middlesex Community College in Perth Amboy, New Jersey; but, he also owns a home, marries a woman whom he “adores” and contemplates if children will come from their union. He, as Monica Hanna correctly asserts, “has attained all the trappings of a new member of the middle class: a stable and prestigious job, a house, and a family.” That is to say, he appears to have settled down to family life and to have tamed his hypersexual behavior, at least to the degree that his involvement with women reproduces, even if on a modicum level, Oscar’s ideas of love. And, perhaps this is what Oscar wins. All the same, Hanna is correct to say that Yuniór, by the end of the novel, emerges as ‘a new man’ at least “in relation to his earlier economic status as well as to his personal development” (100). However, this is not a permanent emergence. Yuniór’s story about a family’s curse that also encloses a narrative about his own gender anxieties, as typical of any recording, is set to be told over and over again. With that being the case, Yuniór’s “new man” status and “personal development” are sites of self-regulation that do not promise a closure. Neither is he, in his description of his current life, able to claim one. In fact, he confesses that his attempts at normalcy (i.e. the house, wife, and the temptation to have children) in his daily living- “When I’m not teaching or coaching baseball or going to the gym or hanging out with the wifey I’m at home writing”- are at crisis with his struggle for fidelity: “I don’t run around after girls anymore. Not much, anyway” (326). The admission of his indiscretions suggests that his hypersexuality continues to cause him unease and distress; thereby, giving cause for his narrative to be told again and over again.

The act of writing through which he witnesses a history he remembers and invents, then, does nothing more than illustrate an endeavor to discipline and regulate his hypersexual behavior- a behavior that once destroyed his relationship with Lola, Suriyan, and assumingly, many other women. It allows him to establish proximity and a personal presence in the history he remembers from which he is able to control and police it for the purpose of placing into discourse the uneasiness and distress he has with his hypersexuality. In particular, his recollection of the events of Abelard, Beli, and Oscar overshadowed by the ominous presence of Trujillo expresses a modulation of his sexuality that allows him to invent himself according to the heteronormativity of America middle class family that functions as a reproduction of work

and that parallels both American cultural sentiments and U.S. politics concerning work and its crisis in relation to noncommittal sex. Overall, the Dominican Diaspora of the novel does not simply create routes of assimilation that map acceptance or marginalization within American culture, but routes where internal mandates require the regulation of the self to the things that once seemed to work with work. Specific to Yuniors, it is the heteronormative monogamous relationships consigned to the institution of family.

CHAPTER 2 READING SELF-REGULATION: BARBARA EHRENREICH'S *NICKEL AND DIMED*, *CONFESSION*, AND THE LOW-WAGE LIVING NARRATIVE

Low-Wages: Blame It on Feelings of Unworthiness

One of the most perplexing moments in Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (1999) is when she postulates, in the "Evaluation" chapter of the book, the cause of low-wage income during the Clinton administration era of welfare reform. She deduces that the principal cause of low-wages is the workers' personal feelings of unworthiness. She reasons that the negative perception and poor treatment of low-wage earners, which she witnessed during her undercover investigation as Barb, - "a divorced homemaker reentering the workforce after many years"- working in Florida waitressing, in Maine housekeeping and dietary aiding, and in Minnesota sales clerking at Wal-Mart, are the root cause for the worker's feelings of unworthiness; and in turn, are the bases for their thinking regarding the equitable pricing of their labor (5). "My guess," she surmises from her experience with living on low-wages, "is that the indignities imposed on so many low-wage workers-the drug tests, the constant surveillance, being 'reamed out' by managers-are part of what keeps wages low. If you're made to feel unworthy enough, you may come to think that what you're paid is what you are actually worth" (sic 211). She qualifies this by asserting that beyond the economics of wages, there are both psychological and cultural bases for why wages remain low grounded in the basic function of human social relations: "But as much as any other social animal, and more so than many, we depend for our self-image on humans immediately around us- to the point of altering our perceptions of the world so as to fit in with theirs" (211). Ehrenreich's conjecture in these passages are meant to suggest that the indignities imposed on workers by management and the rules and policies enforced by America's business culture are to blame for why wages remain low; but given that she changes the tone in the passages to an imperative one addressed in the second person point of view citing, "If *you're* made to feel unworthy enough, *you* may come to think that what *you* are paid is what *you* are actually worth," I venture to go as far as to say that it is also meant to stress, through a rather puzzling correlation between the affect produced by the imposed indignities in relation to the perception that the worker- being in this case the unit measure of the individual- have about her or his self and the rate of pay, the need for an internal modulation in the form of self-regulation of the individual worker's feelings and self-perception that would result in the individual being made to feel worthy enough, which in turn will lead the individual to think that

what she or he is paid is not what she or he is actually worth. But could it be that Ehrenreich is actually proposing that the issue with wages in the U.S. is really a matter of crisis in individual's feelings produced by the perception of others or that access to higher wages is predicated upon an individual's ability and capacity to possess a better feeling of self worth? And why is it necessary to reduce what she witnesses and experiences to such a personal affair?

The answers to these questions are impossible to glean from the book given that it does not offer a formula to determine one's worth nor does it provide any explanation as to how one's feelings of worthiness can prompt a change in the rate of pay (although it does hint at unionism in the most abstract terms, not considering the shifts in labor processes nor the aggressive attack on labor organizing since the early 1980s, and makes appeals to the pathos of the professional and intellectual classes). Nonetheless, what can be gathered from it is that Ehrenreich's conjecture classifies the worker's feelings as one of the principal factors that contributes to America's wage crisis (as opposed to say the material world of work of which she experiences when she labors at various places over the course of several months) and that she makes a case for it by framing her narrative about what she witnesses and experiences while undercover within the rhetoric of confession from which she attempts to establish an authentic 'inner *personal* truth' about the denigrating conditions and practices that comprise so much of low-wage work in America. She does this by buttressing the case she makes in the conventions of the genre of undercover reporting whereby she prioritizes her experiences and reflections of those experiences as the site of evidence for her claims. She admits early in the book that she had prior knowledge of the hardships low-wage earners faced- having a father who was a copper miner, a sister who "struggles against what she calls 'the hopelessness of being a wage slave,'" and a husband who at one point during their relationship "was a \$4.50-an-hour warehouse worker;" and yet, she still chooses to go undercover, likening her decision to that of the "old man who used a calculator to balance his checkbook and then went back and checked the results by doing each sum by hand"(2-3). In short, the genre of undercover reporting provides her with the opportunity to "actually" see what it is like to work at low-wage jobs, to live off the earnings, to use her personal experiences as an occasion to formulate a platform through which she employs first-hand accounts to attest to her guesswork of low-wage living, and to even "discover some hidden economies in the world of the low-wage worker" (3). This strategy

gives place for her to draw upon the confession model as a rhetorical technique through which she secures her position as representative of the low-wage working class and at the same time identify herself as the “other.” ‘Other’ in this sense, as I explore a bit more below in my discussion of Carolyn Betensky’s critique of *Nickel and Dimed*, represents a form of staging that allows her to perform poverty and deny her bourgeois status and that, concomitantly, secures her a distinct bourgeois status separate from those of her peers. Through this technique, especially when considered in a Foucauldian sense, she assumes a form of absolute control over the assimilation as well as the recording of her personal experiences and feelings and holds them up as representational symbols of the low-wage experience and as a site from which she postulates both the problem with and solution to the wage crisis.¹⁵

To this end, my interest in *Nickel and Dimed* is the ways Ehrenreich’s use of the confession, as prefaced above, provides an opportunity to investigate the function of self-regulation, being a special feature of responsibility of the Post-Fordist era that tends to go easily unrecognized for self-reflections, considerations, and other things said to stem from and motivate the inner recesses of the mind. While analyzing specific instances of confessions does allow for an exploration into the function of self-regulation in the book; any attempt to locate explicit moments of self-regulation does not do the same. I contend that to try to read *Nickel and Dimed* for specific moments or examples of self-regulation would be superfluous at best, being that in the genre of investigative reporting, as Brook Kroeger informs us, in her recent work, *Undercover Reporting: The Truth about Deception*, “[T]he writers anchor the text with their personal experiences and reflections...to invite a vicarious, deeply empathetic reaction from readers” (62-3). In this view, self-regulation would be just another example of a configuration of a stream of consciousness or an internal reaction/reflection to the external world, typical of most literary and cultural productions. Rather, by examining Ehrenreich’s rhetorical use of the confession, we can see the ways it threads through her narrative, having a more conceptual appeal to the purpose of the genre, which is said to “include helping to expose indelible descriptions of hard-to-penetrate institutions or social situations that deserve public attention;” and to do so by having the reporter “experience the conditions, the cruelty,

¹⁵ This refers to Michel Foucault’s discussion of the confession in the book, *The History of Sexuality*. According to Foucault, the confession was placed in discourse during the 19th century to address sexuality within secular realms. Placing the confession into discourse, according to Foucault, served to reposition it within the context of the scientific and as such, to make it a thing that was an incomplete act unless it was recorded and interpreted.

and the difficulties in as much the way their subjects experienced them as possible, and to fill in...an already tried-and-true narrative framework with details amassed from actual experiences” (Brooks 8 and 62). In this chapter, I analyze *Nickel and Dimed* by examining Ehrenreich’s use of the confession as it mobilizes self-regulation within the intersections of feelings and perceptions of self-worth conceptualized as sites of resistance to denigrating conditions of work that are, in fact, restricted to self-knowledge, that coalesces with the logic of U.S. neoliberal capitalism and that, in turn, work to further mystify value in the context of work and labor under the guise of measuring self-worth.

Wage Demands and Gender: Feminist Critique Revisited

The essence of Ehrenreich’s conjecture draws upon the same sentiments of feminist critique of work and family and of the demand for wages. It taps into the valorization question of unwaged and undervalued work that has largely constituted gender and race relations since the beginning of America’s industrial age and incites such questions as why some workers’ labor is valued over others. Or how does it come to be that some are paid more than others? Even though Ehrenreich does not directly state it in the passages quoted above and, or at any point in the book, the subject matter of her investigation gives me the impression that she specifically draws upon areas of feminist critique that discuss the ways the ideology and politics of family continue to subjugate women even when they are in the workforce. Considering that her conjecture comes from her investigation into the impact of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 on “the roughly four million women” who were “about to be booted into the labor market by welfare reform... to make it on \$6 or \$7 an hour” (1), and her own struggles with trying to match wages to housing while undercover, it is no surprise that her narrative in *Nickel and Dimed* parallels the concerns feminists have about the ways American culture continue to uphold the primacy of heterosexual marriages premised in patriarchy and the American work ethic, as the “politically approved paths” for economic stability for women; and how, in truth, the family structure keeps a class of women economically dependent on men, perpetuates the constitution of gender and gender division of labor, and racializes subjects who fail to follow the model (Kathi Weeks, 165). As Kathi Weeks tells us in her book, *The Problem with Work*, in reference to Mimi Abramovitz’s historical accounts of welfare reforms, “social welfare policy has been shaped by two fundamental commitments, one the work ethic and the other ...the family ethic.” Weeks argues that “the clearest

distillations of these two systems of norms can be found in the overt efforts of the 1996 welfare reform to promote both the work ethic and heterosexual marriage- for example, by means of work requirements and the enforcement of paternal responsibility” (165).

Indeed, Ehrenreich’s narrative of her experiences while undercover parallels Weeks’ sentiments. There are numerous occasions in the book when she expresses her frustration with work requirements and the presence of paternal responsibility that are tied to work and family ethics. For example, she notes in the book how, with each job, she was made to give up her civil liberties. She recalls being made to take a urine test with a person standing outside the bathroom door when applying for a job at Menards; and being warned “that [her] purse could be searched by management at any time” while she worked as a waitress, which signaled for her that while working at these jobs her moral values were being continuously questioned (135; 208). She further expresses her frustration by looking at the presence of paternal responsibility in some of the jobs she worked that used, what she refers to as the “co-optative power of management,” to euphemize the highly exploitative relations between employers and employees. She recounts that while working for The Maids, being one of the job sites that had a more notable presence of paternal responsibility, there was a “boss- who, as the only male in our midst, exerted a creepy paternalistic kind of power- had managed to convince some of his coworkers that he was struggling against difficult odds and deserving of their unstinting forbearance” (208). Ehrenreich explains his exertion of paternal presence as a manipulation tool to coerce the women into working longer hours, and in one case, to work through an injury based on the notion that he bears the responsibility for them within the customer-labor relations of the company.

It is apparent from the observations Ehrenreich makes in the book that she is not dubious in her assessment of the harsh work environment that women endure. She pins it to the work climate women faced after being forced to work at low-wage jobs following the enactment of the PRWORA and the disparity between wages and the cost of living that women are forced to mediate in order to make ends meet. She recounts throughout *Nickel and Dimed* the struggles she had with securing affordable housing and adequate and healthy food options as well as the difficulties she encountered in Florida, Maine, and Minnesota with matching wages to rent. Although, she admits that for a brief stint in Portland, Maine, “I came closest to achieving a decent fit between income and expenses, but only because I worked seven

days a week,” she indefatigably laments the difficulty of living off current wage rates and the need for a demand for more equitable wages (197). At one point, she even goes as far as to define the disparity between income and expenses as a vicious cycle of work; one that she views as not just simply economic, “but” one that signals “a culture of extreme inequality” (212). Her position, here, is reminiscent of the claims Selma James made many years ago, when she described work and wages in the following terms: “The work you do and the wages you receive are not merely “economic” but social determinants, determinants of social power” (244). In Ehrenreich’s assessment, the social (political) power, which James also alluded to, is evident in the inequality that plays out in the influence the upper class has on the life experiences of the low classes. Ehrenreich explains:

The top 20 percent routinely exercises other, far more consequential forms of power in the world...When they speak, they are listened to. When they complain, someone usually scurries to correct the problem and apologize for it. If they complain often enough, someone far below them in wealth and influence may be chastised or even fired” (215).

She furthers explains it further by asserting that “the affluent exert inordinate power over the lives of the less affluent, and especially over the lives of the poor, determining what public services will be available, if any, what minimum wage, what laws governing the treatment of labor” (sic 216). In short, Ehrenreich gives a vivid picture of the perpetuation of inequality based on the disparity in wages between the classes and the social relations that ensue from this disparity. Her ability to articulate this form of inequality in the framework of wages explains why even after 15 years of publication the book is still widely referenced when questions of low-wage work and its effect on poverty and housing come up in academic and/or popular media sectors today and continues to receive positive reviews from sociologist, labor historians, cultural critics, and political theorists alike, such as Francis Fox Piven, Stud Terkel, Naomi Klein, and Mike Davis, to name a few.

By the same token, the fact that her book offers such insight makes her conjecture about the worker’s feelings of unworthiness as the site of the crisis with wages so baffling. It replicates the kinds of emotive and intuitive rhetoric often associated with discussions of women and work and attempts to generalize the political idea of comparable worthiness of wages of the 70s and 80s feminist movements

to a more discursive argument about wages in the 21st century.¹⁶ The result of this is that the questions raised in the book regarding wages becomes not just a question of value of labor of which one would have to revisit Adam Smith or Frederick Engels and Karl Marx; rather it becomes a question of value housed in the measure or better yet, perception of quality of character or personhood. The perceived quality, in this sense, defined in Ehrenreich's conjectures as the affect of "feelings" constructed in the production of low-wage labor, constitutes the crisis that guides the inquiry of the book and becomes the problem for the issue of wages and low-wage living. It, thus, requires that the feelings of the worker be made adjustable, and subject to discipline and recalibration in order to address the crisis. It is important to note that this approach in her text functions as a strategy to admonish the more affluent; however, the self-regulatory precept that requires the adjustment, discipline, and recalibration of the worker's feelings still relies on the individual worker's own ability to feel worthy even in conditions of low-wage labor and living. This, of course, alludes to questions of gender and race in complex ways that do not allow for any theoretical inquiry into their formations other than how one gets seen. Accordingly, the matter of wages gets assumed in the most rudimentary form of existentialist thought, which somehow moves the larger matter of social relations and politics expressed in *Nickel and Dimed* to the subject of the authenticity of an individual who should be able to hold a unique position as a self-determining and self-regulating (responsible) agent.

***Nickel and Dimed* and the Problem with Work**

The question as to why there is such a turn in *Nickel and Dimed* directs my reading; particularly, in relation to what this moment in the text might bring to bear on my analysis of the book through the question of self-regulation. I specifically draw on Kathi Weeks' observations about "the problem with

¹⁶ See Katherine Turk's *Equality on Trial: Gender and Rights in the Modern American Workplace* (2016). In the book, Turk informs that comparable worth is a radical thought and movement that seeks after sexual equality in pay. According to Turk, it challenged the "family wage ideology" wherefrom "the notion that a worker's pay should reflect his or her presumed status as a male provider or female dependent" was grounded (104). She dates comparable worth back to the WWII era, when it was used to protect the high wages women received in the jobs they held. She notes how it continued to influence fights for sex equality in pay well into the 50s and 60s among feminists and some governmental officials and although it lost the potency of its influence in the 70s, making way to some degree for affirmative action, it regained its momentum in the 80s after working women were disappointed with the impact of affirmative action on their fight for sex equality. She further informs that in the 80s it was "affirmed tentatively" by Title VII in federal courts and decisions to configure new measures of equal pay and that it continues to be a staple for women's fight for equal pay (104-5).

work,” to do such a reading given that she questions the very nature of work and our connection to it in modern society. Weeks defines the problem with work from the refusal to work perspective of the autonomous Marxist tradition by paying special attention to political theory and discourse that she believes tend to focus primarily on the work ethic and the demand for wages as popular strategies to argue against systems of labor in the U.S. Weeks tells us that these popular strategies in addressing the problems with work “promote our acceptance of and powerful identification with work, and help to make it such an object of desire and privileged field of aspiration.” She bases her claims on the idea that these strategies leave no space for a possible existence, in either our imagination or in our life experiences, outside work. She argues that for this reason, these strategies (and, here, she points to feminism in particular; although, she later suggests the same for other criticisms and movements) have “tendencies toward the mystification and moralization of work” (12). As in the case of *Nickel and Dimed*, Weeks’ claim is most saliently made when Ehrenreich writes, “I could drift along like this, in some dreamy proletarian idyll, except two things. One is management...The other problem, in addition to the less-than-nurturing management style, is that this job shows no sign of being financially viable” (22 and 25). According to this passage, Ehrenreich references her work as an “idyllic” proletarian dream notwithstanding the problems with management and low-wages- the former of which she charges with disrupting the low-wage workers’ work ethic by citing and illustrating the ways management creates unnecessarily difficult and frustrating work environments. However, work, in and of itself, stays outside the fray of Ehrenreich’s proletarian dream. In essence, work is not the problem that is being worked out in *Nickel and Dimed*.

Of this, Weeks urges us to see that work, in theory, in practice, in our imagination, and in our life experiences, has become naturalized. Therefore, struggles against what she refers to as “both labor’s misrecognition and devaluation on the one hand, and its metaphysics and moralization on the other hand” are not made in reference to work, as a subject in and of itself, but rather as an object within concepts of “economic necessity and collective ethical obligation” (13 and 11 respectively). To bring this back full circle, Weeks helps us to see that discussions of work in our contemporary politics and culture are premised in the necessity of work and the work ethic. Therefore, critiques of work are characteristically mobilized in these two areas, which I assert, tend to prescribe to the need for modulation, either in forms that require groups or individuals to adjust, recalibrate, and/or discipline themselves according to the

logics of capitalism or that demands recognition by these same groups for their adjustments, modulations, and discipline, - the latter of which Ehrenreich addresses most discernibly in the book, *Bait and Switch*.¹⁷ This helps to explain why Ehrenreich's evaluation of her experience working for low-wages leads her to report on the work ethics of those she encounters while undercover: "I never met an actual slacker or, for that matter, a drug addict or thief. On the contrary, I was amazed and sometimes saddened by the pride people took in jobs that rewarded them so meagerly, either in wages or in recognition" (212).¹⁸ Here, Ehrenreich's argument about the poor treatment of workers rests precisely on the issue of work ethic and wages, which she demonstrates through her recollection of the dignity and self-discipline the workers exhibited. The fact that they did not get fairly compensated then becomes the point of contention in the context of recognition (as do the issue of better work, less work, and alienation) and gets interpolated into the affect of "feelings" that the workers have about their self worth.

It follows, then, that what makes *Nickel and Dimed* important to the question of self-regulation is partly the features of contemporary cultural responses to America's work crisis and the shifts in production since the 1970s (including hierarchies of labor forms, changes in production process, advancing technology, capitalist valorization processes, etc.) that focus on the employment of affect in discourses of work, and is largely, the overlapping of these features into areas that look to the logic and rhetoric of responsibility in order to constitute both the problem and solution of the work crisis in the late stage of U.S. capitalism. However, I recognize that the former is what Ehrenreich describes in the phrase

¹⁷ *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* (2005) was published four years after *Nickel and Dimed* and replicates the investigative project of the latter. However, in this book, she goes undercover to examine the unemployed and underemployed professional sector in the U.S., after the financial crisis at the beginning of the 21st century left many without work. She recounts her experience looking for jobs in the professional sectors with no success. As a result, much of the book focuses on the ways she modulates herself financially, mentally, and physically to find work. The tragedy of the book, if we dare call it that, is that it failed to explore the significance of the inability of job seekers of the professional sector to illicit recognition and reward for their efforts to self-regulate to the new matrices of their fields; especially, in light of the fact that the jobs they sought were simply no longer available.

¹⁸ Ehrenreich's persistence in debating the work ethics and wages demonstrates the missed opportunities for a critique of work, especially in the context of the welfare reform. For example, the crisis, as defined by the Act attributed to unwed pregnancies and single parent households, is an issue for neoliberal global capitalism. If we consider that a little over a century and a half ago, such pregnancies and births were required to grow slave labor population and to decrease the demand for the importation of humans from Africa for capital production of the plantocracy, then the contingency for taking such naturalized positions on work and family would not appear to us so normalized.

“to feel unworthy,” being not actually the same as the term, “affect,” which has been widely directed and defined by authorities in literary/cultural criticism. But, much like some of those authorities, Ehrenreich seems to suggest the possibility of a political movement prompted by affect and emotion. And not too dissimilar to Michael Hardt, for example, she seems to conceive a notion of the valorization production of the worker’s subjectivity through the idea that the production of affect in labor has the potential for “subversion and autonomous constitution” (Hardt’s “Affective Labor,” 89). The latter, on the other hand, refers to Ehrenreich’s problematizing of “feelings” and prioritizing constructions of self-perception through which her persona “Barb” and potentially, all other individuals of the low-wage sectors whom Barb represents, must self-regulate their feelings in order to change the wage system outside of routes of solutions that look to social responsibility of the state or capitalism. This, of course, is to not quickly brush over the direct or indirect influence that contemporary ideologies of affective labor have on a reading of *Nickel and Dimed*. For, as the question of resistance, change, and autonomy stand in the forefront of conceptualizing work in a national and global context, discussions of it find a welcoming site in scholarship on affective labor. Clearly, the premise of this book finds a hospitable place there as well. However, it is not so much the ways the book follows the logic set forth by affective labor theorists that creates for me this reticence in reading it through this frame, given that the expectations, here, are not to gain some sort of value in, say, the ways affective theory purports to interrogate the benefits of exercising autonomy or framing subjectivity within the context of finding new ways to understand the human condition under the current structure of work in this late stage of capitalism. What is of most concern here, as continually taken up in this dissertation, is how the inquiries of work that find hospitable spaces in following the logic of affect concerning labor fail to recognize their reliance on ideas of personal responsibility that relegate larger social conditions to a type of self-regulatory, self-determinist frame of individuality and internality.

Self-regulation and the Rhetoric of Confession

Of course, self-regulation does not allow for obvious forms of external influences and seeks, instead, its expression in the volition of the individual, who must facilitate a course of action from within the faculties of his/her consciousness. In the case of *Nickel and Dimed*, we see this in the ways “Barb” expresses her choice to experience, and her accountability for the experiences she has, living undercover

as a low-wage worker. For example, early in the book, she confesses, “I had gone into this venture in the spirit of science, to test a mathematical proposition, but somewhere along the line, in the tunnel vision imposed by long shifts and relentless concentration, it became a test of myself, and clearly I have failed.” This confession comes immediately after she admits to having a terrible experience while waitressing at Hearthside in Florida. According to Ehrenreich, on one particular day, while struggling to wait on a rush of patrons, who had come to the restaurant all at the same time, her manager, Joy, went on a tirade about Ehrenreich and her coworkers’ job performances. Recalling the feeling of being belittled and tired, Ehrenreich recounts leaving the job and struggling with the guilt of it (48). What makes this moment important to an understanding of the function of self-regulation is that first, despite the issue she has with management that provokes her to react so drastically, she still recalls this experience through an admission of guilt in a manner that sets the tone for how she wants the audience to grasp her intent to go undercover and her failings while undercover. It also points to the need for some form of modulation in her responses to this experience. Second, this passage, being just one of many examples in the book when she admits guilt, works to appeal to the authenticity of not only what she experiences and witnesses, but to an inner truth through which she tries to authenticate herself and her feelings, as a way to represent a group of people who would more likely than not incur the same experience.

The expression of her volition and accountability and the act of admission to appeal to the authenticity of her the “inner truth” can be read rhetorically through the model of the confession. Peter Brooks, in *Troubling Confessions*, explains that the confessional model in Western culture requires one to “take verbal responsibility of one’s action” (2); and that the development of it, emerging most observably in the Romantic era to present day, is also a speech act of authenticity “par excellence the kind of speech in which the individual authenticates his inner truth” (4). He discusses these models through an inquiry into the “kinds of cultural work we ask of confessions,” which works explicitly in modern society to *reflect* and *instigate* “the emergence of the modern sense of selfhood and the individual’s responsibility for his or her actions, intentions, thoughts- and for the acts of speech that lay them bare” (5). When Brooks discusses confession of modern society this way, he inevitably, identifies a kind of precipitous action, operation and/or performance of responsibility that relates the confessions of one’s guilt, intentions, thoughts, etc. to not merely the act of recognition; but also, to that of modulation of the inner self- and

when taken as an act of volition the modulation constitutes self-regulation. Accordingly, “Barb,” the undercover persona of Ehrenreich, emerges not merely as a reporter taking on a fictitious identity to gain access into the world of low-wages earners with the intent to understand and experience their plight; but as a confessor, whose narrative verbalizes the responsibility of her actions as well as her experiences with humiliation and guilt aimed at representing the reactions, expressions, and emotions of those downtrodden and oppressed by the low-wage system of America’s work (and to do so while also mediating her own identity as member of the upper-middle class). By reading the narrative this way, we can see how through the confession, Ehrenreich frames the problem with low-wages in the paradigm of “feelings,” and proposes a solution to it using that same standard.

Uncovering the Confessor

To locate, Barb, the confessor, I turn briefly to Carolyn Betensky’s polemical critique of *Nickel and Dimed*. In her article, “Princes as Paupers: Pleasure and the Imagination of Powerlessness,” published in *Cultural Critique*, Betensky analyzes the book, as a representation of a body of work within the genre of undercover investigation that employs the drama of a self-induced riches-to-rags experience and subsequently, reports on that experience to “consolidate” and “escape” a bourgeois subjectivity (130). Betensky argues that while Ehrenreich’s book, as she reads it alongside George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, appears to unveil to America’s middle and upper classes the harsh reality members of the lower working class face in American society, it really provides an opportunity for Ehrenreich to confirm her bourgeois identity in the context of performing poverty and to use the performance of poverty to disavow a bourgeois self by defining it up against a bourgeois other (130). Analogizing this class-crossing production to the structure of the larger tradition of passing narratives that features “privileged subjects in impoverished disguises” referencing certain canonical reporting as John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me*, Betensky critiques Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed*, and similar works in the genre, as a production of not just disguising to assume an identity of the more vulnerable population, but one that is a “fundamentally asymmetrical, systems of signification” in which the simulator is considered “moral beneficial” and “a courageous hero” (131). Betensky further asserts that class-crossing simulators are well aware that they are not impoverished and cannot authentically experience poverty in their privilege position; however, the stories of those who are impoverished are not enough for them. The simulators still

want to experience it for themselves and this she argues produces for them a sense of pleasure. The pleasure resides in their ability to expand their bourgeois subjectivity and at the same time, to appear to escape it based on their arbitrary experience into poverty (131-2). To put it in more simple terms, Betensky asserts that “consolidation” and “escape” produce for the simulator the sense that they have successfully gained access to the “other’s” world and experiences of poverty and also, the knowledge that they cannot ‘authentically’ experience powerlessness. This allows the simulator to possess, what Betensky describes as a “disinterested” distance from it, which in effect fulfills the desired pleasure of both being in the world of the powerless, but not of it, so to speak.

When we consider this in the frame of Barb, as the confessor, we are confronted with duplicity in Ehrenreich’s narrative. On the hand, she seeks to authenticate herself as Barb in the book, who notes, “In my own family, the low-wage way of life had never been many degrees of separation away;” and on the other hand, distance herself as Ehrenreich by noting paradoxically, “[I]t was close enough, in any case, to make me treasure the gloriously autonomous, if not always well-paid writing life” (2). It is through this attempt to authentic Barb and distance herself, as Ehrenreich, the upper-middle class writer, that the book works to enable her to take on a persona that give space for her to confess her responsibility from the perspective of the low-wage working class and from that of the upper-middle class. Hence, she not only consolidates and escapes her selfhood as a worker; but also, distinguishes her selfhood as a member of the upper-middle class. This duplicity shadows her narrative and provokes her to make such confessions as the one she expresses when recalling the arduous tasks of cleaning while working for The Maids:

But I will say this for myself: I have never employed a cleaning person or service (except, on two occasions, to prepare my house for a short-term tenant) even though various partners and husbands have badgered me over the years to do so. When I could have used one, when the kids were little, I couldn’t afford it; and later, when I could afford it, I still found the idea repugnant....But mostly I reject the idea, even after all my upper-middle class friends had, guiltily and as covertly as possible, hired help for themselves, because this is just not the kind of relationship I want to have with another human being. (91)

What Ehrenreich is able to do in this passage, through her confession of not using cleaning services except on two occasions, is admit her guilt and authenticate her inner truth as a person who can now say that she has cleaned residential homes and who recognizes the problem with hiring people to do such

labor. The pleasure that Betensky points to describes for us here Ehrenreich's ability to confess ignominy, having had the experience of humiliation and denigration of low-wage labor, and to commend herself as a member of the bourgeois, who does not participate in the denigrating practices of low-wage labor. Thus, she is able to establish credibility on both ends, from the low-wage worker's perspective and from that of upper-middle class. She speaks for the lower class by hinting at the indignities that come with housekeeping, having given greater detail of the indignities earlier in the book when she recounts the moping protocols for employees of The Maids. There she writes, "A mop and a full bucket of hot soapy water would not only get a floor cleaner but would be a lot more for the person who does the cleaning. But it is this primal posture of submission- and of what is ultimately anal accessibility- that seems to gratify the consumers of maid services" (85). In like ways, she speaks to the upper-class, admonishing them for hiring services that would require humans to interact through such paradigms of postures of submission. The significance of this is that it, as Betensky informs, "allows narcissistic pleasure to get itself misrecognized as politically significant action on behalf of the other" and this she sees as "contributing a strategy of continued, euphemized domination to the hegemonic portfolio" (133). In other words, the duplicity that makes up so much of Ehrenreich narrative attempts to gesture an encompassing study of the low-wage sector of America's work, even as it perpetuates a kind of consensus with the dominate thought regarding the politics of work in the U.S. Whereas, empirically, the undertaking of experiencing the life of the low-wage worker has the semblance of arriving at a truth about the condition and causes of low-wage living. Ideologically, that semblance, if we consider what Slavoj Žižek discusses in his book, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* regarding the re-appropriations of other's cultural experiences, is a sign of a superior form of mystification (34). Žižek cautions that "probing into the different cultural traditions is precisely *not* the way to grasp the political dynamics" of a thing in consideration (34). For such an endeavor, Žižek warns, expanding for us Betensky's observations, that sympathetic as it were, does nothing more than "relativize one's own standpoint" (34). And is not Ehrenreich's undercover investigation meant to make relative the position she puts forth in her narrative on the cause for low-wage: "If you are constantly reminded of your lowly position in the social hierarchy, whether by individual managers or by a plethora of impersonal rules, you begin to accept that unfortunate status" (210)? And does not it shape a sense of subjectivity and authority in regard to a self that is conjured to give her

access to the world of the low-wage earners or more specifically, a manufactured proximity to the living conditions that she generates for herself as Barb- and through which she can verbalize Barb's responsibility and offer it up as a site to analyze and constitute the experiences of those who Barb simulates?

The Problem with Wages: Confessing the Feeling of It All

To understand the significance of Betensky's claims about the duplicity in Ehrenreich's narrative that coalesces with a "strategy of continued, euphemized domination to the hegemonic portfolio," let's revisit the passage quoted above that relates Ehrenreich confession regarding her experience working at The Maid. In addition to speaking for the low-wage worker and speaking to the upper-middle class, in the above passage, she pulls on the pathos of humiliation and guilt and situates these feelings as the problem site for the issue with wages. For the housecleaning workers, who are made to scrub floors, which Barb does in one home while the homeowner, Mrs. W. watches to ensure that she does not fail to "leave out some stray square inch" and to ask, "[c]ould you just scrub the floor in the entryway while you're at it;" Ehrenreich surmises that they are made to endure humiliation and injury to their sense of being (84-5). For the upper-middle class, she uses her experience to invoke a sense of guilt for participating in the production of humiliation and injury to dignity of people in the low-wage sectors of society. In essence, Ehrenreich's use of the confession in this moment in the book generates for her a form of authenticity wherefrom she verbalizes her responsibility in the production of the indignities of the labor form of housecleaning, but only minimally, given that she used the service twice and prioritizes emotions produced in this social form of labor as the problem with low-wage living.

However, this type of problematizing of emotions is not insular. In fact, this strategy repeats throughout her narrative. For example, Ehrenreich recalls one incident that occurred while cleaning houses in Maine. The incident begins when Ehrenreich's team-leader, Holly, injures her ankle as they are walking to one of the homes they are assigned to clean. Ehrenreich remembers having to force herself to stay in character as she is confronted with the internal struggle between getting Holly medical help and working while she has to watch her team-leader endure the pain. She also recalls having to convince Holly to tell Ted, the manager, of the injury. Ehrenreich recounts that to her chagrin Holly calls Ted, but whimpers apologetically about the injury and places the blame for calling him on Barb with such remarks

as “Barbara is making a fuss.” Ehrenreich tells how she eventually talks to Ted, expressing her frustration with the whole business of making employees work through injuries while he repeatedly tells her to “calm down” and how she hangs up on him, and tries to convince Holly to sit with her leg up while the other workers finished cleaning the house. She recounts her attempts to call for a work strike and the dismissive responses she received from the other employees. She repines how even Holly insisted on continuing to work if nothing but “just doing the bathrooms” (111). While this incident creates great trepidation for Ehrenreich during the event itself, and later, when reporting on it, it also represents in a very real sense the conflicts and challenges between labor and capital relations with the restructuring of U.S. industries since the 1970s. This period saw to the global expansion of labor markets and a marked decrease in blue collar factory labor in the U.S. that attributed to the advancements in technology, outsourcing, and the retooling of production in general. As a result, the service sector has been the fastest growing sector of industry in the U.S. Service sectors jobs, much like the one Ehrenreich discusses, are not required to offer health coverage, but often place great strain on the employees’ health. Many are not unionized, and employees of these jobs are not able to effectively use the tactics employed by unions, such as the work strike Ehrenreich champions when faced with the drama of this event and others throughout the book. And often times, these jobs are precarious, having access to a vast supply of an unskilled reserved army of labor.¹⁹ For all these reasons and more, Ehrenreich witnesses her team-leader work through the pain and braces for the backlash she anticipates receiving from Ted for her tirade about Holly’s ankle. However, as Ehrenreich tries to navigate the tensions in both the experiences she had and the story she tells, she surprisingly steers away from discussing patterns of accumulation and modes of regulations that have generated opportunities for such exploitation.²⁰ Instead, she writes about her frustration with and her sense of uncertainty regarding her behavior in that moment.

¹⁹ Ernest Sternberg gives a history of it in a fairly brief article about the eight new categorical ages of capitalism. Although the article is somewhat dated, it still provides concise information about capitalism in the era post 1970s. See “Transformations: The Eight New Ages of Capitalism” (1993). Also see Michael D. Yates’ *Naming the System* (2003); Steven Peter Vallas’ *Work: A Critique* (2012); John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff’s *The Great Financial Crisis*; David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005); Thomas Friedman’s *The World is Flat* (2005); and Jeremy Rifkin’s *The End of Work* (1995) to name a few.

²⁰ In the introduction to the book, *Post-Fordism*, Ash Amin describes it in terms of the “institutions and conventions which ‘regulate’ and reproduce a given accumulation regime through application across a wide range of areas, including law, state policy, political practices, industrial codes, governance philosophies, rules of negotiation and bargaining, cultures of consumptions and social expectation” (8).

She admits to stating to her co-workers on the ride back to the office that “Oh, I’m not worried about it [getting fired]. There’re millions of jobs out there” (sic 113). And when another co-worker pleads with her entreating, “But we need you,” or “You can’t leave Ted in the lurch,” she recalls retorting, “What’s all this worrying about Ted? He’ll find someone else. He’ll take anyone who can manage to show up sober at 7:30 in the morning. Sober and standing upright.” She shares how Holly attempts to challenge her with the reply, “[n]ot everyone can get this job. You have to pass the test,” further enrages her, resulting in her sounding off almost in a bellow, “*Anyone* can pass that test!” She recalls this moment with an admission of guilt and confesses, “It’s an inexcusable outburst.” Then questioning herself, she writes, “Where’s my professionalism, anyway, the journalistic detachment that was supposed to guide and sustain me every inch of the way?” (113). Having finally nestled in her guilt and humiliation, she professes, “But misdirected rage is not an easy thing to hold on to; the last sparks of it get snuffed out, as they deserve to be, in the icy waters of humiliation and defeat.” She reasons with the reader that her behavior could only be expected to have caused her co-workers to hate her and that as much as this place represented a bad space for her, it must also do the same for those most vulnerable to such an experience: “The only thing I know for sure is that this is as low as I can get in my life as a maid, and probably in most other lives as well” (113-4).

To be clear, Ehrenreich’s use of the rhetorical appeal to pathos through her demonstrations of the affect of guilt and humiliation works to galvanize this same affect among those who inflict it on the more vulnerable people. If we consider what she shares in her blog about the publication of *Nickel and Dimed* concerning the feedback she received from the more affluent, then it could be argued that she succeeded to some degree. In the blog, she writes, “Again and again, in that first year or two after publication, people came up to me and opened with the words, ‘I never thought...’ or ‘I hadn’t realized....’ And if I had a quarter for every person who’s told me he or she now tipped more generously, I would be able to start my own foundation.” Yet, the affect of guilt and humiliation are not only problems for the affluent to adjust, discipline and regulate. Ehrenreich’s expression of her own guilt and humiliation, as a worker who was frustrated with the conditions of work suggests that the affect of guilt and humiliation are predominantly problems for the low-wage worker.

Regarding Barb: Self-regulating Authenticity

In order to appeal to a sense of logic that does not appear to rely principally on that which is emotive and intuitive, so as to forward a confession that can be said to provide authentic and actual evidence for her conjecture about the worker's feelings in relation to wages and the need for some form of modulations of those feelings, Ehrenreich makes repeated reference to her background as a scientist with a PhD in biology. In fact, she informs that her background in science influenced her decision to go undercover and asserts that her training in biology directed her investigation. She notes that, in particular, it helped her set the parameters of the investigation and the measurements by which she evaluated it. By way of an example, she states, "In that line of business [biology], you can think all you want, but sooner or later you have to get to the bench and plunge into the everyday chaos of nature, where surprises lurk in the most mundane measurements (3). And to illustrate her attempts to maintain a scientific distance during the course of her investigation and her subsequent reporting of it, she writes such phrases as "in the spirit of science" or "slow down and above all detach." This approach, if we recall Betensky's analysis of *Nickel and Dimed*, certainly works to consolidate her bourgeois subjectivity; but, in addition, it structures her confession. This is to say that Ehrenreich's reference to her scientific background shapes her confession so that it does not appear motivated by religion or a desire to reach the divine by which she then admits the sin she discovers within herself; rather, it is provoked by what Michel Foucault's conceptualizes in *The History of Sexuality*, a desire to put confession into discourse, emulating from the scientific model that elicits both the confession and the interpretation of the confession (66). According to Foucault, "the rituals of confession to function within the norms of scientific regularity" began in the nineteenth century as a secular addressed to sexuality (65). The purpose of such employment, Foucault informs, was to shift the confession of sexuality from seeking the truth that spoke after "sin and salvation" to that of "the bodies and life process- the discourse of science" (64). In other words, it made sexuality an object of interpretation. As such, he charges that the function of confessions changed from being a form of discourse that sought to uncover a truth about the self to one that sought the hermeneutics of that which was hidden even from the self (66). The method of discovering the truth through the scientific discourse of the confession, for Foucault, operated from the premise that the truth did not rest entirely in the confession itself, but in an interpretation of it. He writes:

The truth did not reside solely in the subject who, by confessing, would reveal it wholly formed. It was constituted in two stages: present but incomplete, blind to itself, in the one who spoke, it could only reach completion in the one who assimilated and recorded it. It was the latter's function to verify this obscure truth: the revelation of confession to be coupled with the decipherment of what is said. (66)

What Foucault helps us to see is that by constituting the confession this way, Ehrenreich is able to be both the confessor and interpreter/recorder of the confession. Through it, she has at her tongue or better yet, at her finger tips, both the power of utterance and the power to record/assimilate the utterance in order to facilitate the production of self-knowledge (confessing the hidden) and self-perception (interpreting that confession of the hidden) from which she assembles a narrative framed completely by her sense of truth. The distinguishing quality of it in Ehrenreich's narrative is that it works to move the affect of "feelings" from the nebulous realm of the inner recesses of the mind to the socio-political realm of labor and capital relations where it can appear to systemically direct the knowledge and operations of wage crisis in the U.S.

Self-regulation, in this framework, that leads the charge for the adjustment, recalibration, and discipline of the self in *Nickel and Dimed*, appearing as the site for addressing the problem with wages through the modulation of affect belongs, as I stated above, to the larger tradition of confession in the very real sense that we gathered from Brooks and operates, in a manner that allows Ehrenreich to possess the complete utterance of representations (i.e. her personal experiences) of the conditions of low-wage work and living, as a strategy through which she prioritizes constructions of self-perception to address the wage crisis. For example, while reflecting on her experiences at Wal-Mart with an employee, who admonishes her for not organizing areas in the women clothing section properly, she contemplates and records her perception regarding herself as Barb:

What I have to face is that "Barb," the name on my ID tag, is not exactly the same person as Barbara. "Barb" is what I was called as a child, and still am by my siblings, and I sense that at some level I'm regressing. Take away the career and the higher education, and maybe what you're left with is this original Barb, the one who might have ended up working at Wal-Mart for real if her father hadn't managed to climb out of the mines. So it's interesting, and more than a little disturbing, to see how Barb turned out- that she's meaner and slyer than I am, more cherishing of grudges, and not quite as smart as I'd hoped. (169)

Clearly, Ehrenreich tries to use this moment of self-reflection to relate to the misfortune of those she investigates. She pulls away all the things that position her as different from them, and then exposes what

has become of her while living in their environment. Consequently, she finds herself confronted by Barb, the \$7-an-hour-worker version of herself, who, according to Ehrenreich, is mean, sly, resentful, and lacking in intelligence. Ehrenreich is thus moved to quickly distinguish herself as Barbara, who, thanks to her father for his ability to pull himself out of the trenches of low-wage work, is none of those things. In fact, she is the negation of Barb. She represents the possible outcome to a life experience not shaped by repetitiously demeaning and belittling labor. Hence, her self-perception of her self-worth as possessing some value that should be reflected in wages, while challenged at various moments during her investigation, remains intact. Having this sense of worth creates in her a tension that incites her to question: “Why does anybody put up with the wages we’re paid” (178) or “Why isn’t this resistance [of employers to pay more] met by more effective counterpressure from the workers themselves” (204). Moreover, it spurs her desire to galvanize her co-workers to speak up to managers, go on work strikes, and start unions (which she believes could have been possible if she “could have afforded to work at Wal-Mart a little longer” (191)). At every site Ehrenreich worked, she saw opportunity to resist the denigration of work conditions and express her disappointment in not seeing this largely from her co-workers. Much to her frustration, many were complacent and accepting of the poor treatment and low-wages they received from their employers. She admits to being “baffled...by what seemed like a certain lack of get-up-and-go on the part of her co-workers” (205). While her bafflement does rouse her to discuss some of the political and economic rationales and measurements utilized by employers to keep wages low or the individual circumstances of the workers that may keep them at a particular job including issues with transportation, childcare, and the difficulties of locating and getting hired at new jobs; the crux of her attention focuses on the psychological impact of it reflected in the worker’s feelings of self-worth (205). For validation, she likens the psychological impact of the poorly treated and compensated worker to animals she studied in labs who faced the similar stresses related to being made to feel inferior:

[T]here is ample evidence that animals- rats and monkeys, for example- that are forced into a subordinate status within their social systems adapt their brain chemistry accordingly, becoming ‘depressed’ in humanlike ways. Their behavior is anxious and withdrawn; the level of serotonin (the neurotransmitter boosted by some antidepressants) declines in their brains. And – what is especially relevant here- they avoid fighting even in self-defense. (211)

She admits that humans are “vastly more complicated,” but still exploits this illustration as evidence for her conjecture about why some many workers take a defense-less posture when it comes to wages. That is to say, she likens the psychological and, to some degree, physical effects on animals forced into inferior positions among their species to what she notes as a social development of workers denigrated by conditions of work. More importantly, she draws a correlation between the trained responses of the animals and that of humans. To say the least, she postulates a definite connection between a subject being made to feel unworthy, resulting in it having such a perception of itself, and the lack of motivation to resist and counter the thing that produces such a feeling. The inverse of Ehrenreich’s conjecture, of course, assumes that if the subject does feel worthy enough, whether because it receives better treatment, or it finds strength in its own volition, it will be motivated to take countermeasures or steps of resistance to arrest the production of its own subjugation. But again, what this looks like beyond that of the old habits of labor movements, fails to be seen.

What about the Matter of Race?

Up to this point in the chapter, little reference has been made about the matter of race. In part, this has to do with the ways the matter of race appears in the book. Typical to the general approach to race in discourses of work, as pointed out by critical race scholars such as David Roediger, Manning Marable, and Barbara Fields, much of the discussion in *Nickel and Dimed* centers on class and places race in the periphery; or, approaches it with a degree of an illusion of permanence and finiteness as if it has not been historically formed (Roediger 1991; Marable 2005 respectively). For this reason, I feared that to proceed with a discussion of it earlier in this chapter would result in a reading of race that would trivialize it to the matter of how one group gets subjugated more than other groups in the world of low-wage work along with examples of this that do or do not exist in *Nickel and Dimed*. I also feared getting lost in a discussion of how Ehrenreich’s investigation and narrative principally focus on the experiences of white American women. And in truth, such a claim would have merit considering that with the exception of one instance in the book when she tells the story of Caroline, a black woman living in Minnesota whom she is introduced to through a mutual friend, the few occasions when she acknowledges the possible advantages she has while working undercover as a white English speaking woman, or the details she

shares about the demographics of her co-workers; the matter of race in the book is by and large minimized.

But, beyond my apprehension, there is a much more practical reason for the discussion of race at this moment in the chapter. What became apparent to me in my reading of the book is that a consideration of the question of race in the context of Ehrenreich's conjecture about the worker's feeling of worthiness as well as the overall argument she sets forth in the book, exposes a contradiction in the book's objective and sheds new light on Betensky's observations about the ways *Nickel and Dimed* contributes to "a strategy of continued, euphemized domination to the hegemonic portfolio." As stated above, Ehrenreich's conjecture rests on the correlation between the poor treatment workers receive (defined largely by the perception of others) and their perception of themselves (again, defined largely by the perception of others stated most saliently in the line, "But as much as any social animals, and more so than many, we depend for our self-image on the humans immediately around us-to the point of altering our perceptions of the world so as to fit in with theirs") (211). What is at stake for such a conjecture, as I have tried to argue in this chapter, is to change perceptions of the worker so that she or he can feel worthy enough to think that she or he is not being paid what she or he is actually worth. However, when we consider this in the context of race, we are faced with a conundrum expressed in this most elementary question: "How do I get someone to see me better, so they can treat me better?"

Despite that such a question has proven to be quite problematic in cultural inquiries about race both in national and colonial contexts, the fact that Ehrenreich uses some semblance of this question in the context of class seems to allow the knottiness of it to go under the radar. However, whether or not Ehrenreich is fully aware that this question has a close tie to that of race or that it underlies her discussion of it, she seems to express it when she recounts several experiences she has while wearing the Maids uniform outside of work. She recalls one instance when she stopped at a diner and was ignored by the waitress when making repeated requests for ice tea (100). In another instance, she remembers receiving invasive stares while shopping at a supermarket. To her, the stares translate to "What are *you* doing here? And, No wonder she's poor, she's got a beer in her shopping cart." She attributes these responses to her uniform, which she believes defines her social (class) status: "True, I don't look so good by the end of the day and probably smell of eau de toilet and sweat, but it's the brilliant green-and-yellow uniform

that gives me away, like the prison clothes on a fugitive.” What is most telling about these passages is that through them we can see that she tries to make the affect of this moment available to her readers by likening it to the experiences of black people. She speculates, “Maybe, it occurs to me, I’m getting a tiny glimpse of what it would be like to be black” (100). By using this semblance, here, Ehrenreich seems to critique the stigma of low-wage work on Americans operationally in order to direct attention to its use in justifying forms of treatment conducive to the perpetuation of the low-wage class condition. She likens it to the ways that race in America has functioned to do the same against African Americans, as if to say that even as the stigmas attributed to skin color work to rationalize the treatment African Americans experience in the U.S.; and here I add, that works in tandem with the customary conditions of their labor since slavery, it is this very stigma that preserves the continuation of this treatment and this is done so without any serious consideration in the general public for the ways this type of casting is largely fashioned from perception.

Yet, the thing that gets exposed here is the dependency that her conjecture places upon the worker. In other words, according to Ehrenreich’s recollection of her personal experiences, the worker’s self-perception and experience with low-wage living, which she postulates as potentially similar to that of African Americans given her use of semblance, are dependent on the perception of others. Thus, her use of the analogy of race reveals that what is working in tandem with self-regulation is its negation: dependency. By this I mean that there is an element in her analogy that assumes the worker’s self-perception is contingent on the perception of others. As such, even though her observations expose a type of perception that rationalizes, as stated above, the perception placed on the low-wage worker, they also seem to suggest that the success of the low-wage worker’s resistance to conditions generated from such perceptions are dependent in some measure on those very perceptions. In other words, and returning to the discussion that began this chapter, the workers’ access to higher wages and better working conditions are predicated on their ability to change these conditions by self-regulating themselves to modulate their self-perception in relation to the ways people see them. One way to think of it is to consider Manning Marable’s assertion of dependency and race. Of dependency and race, Marable asserts that from electoral process, political programs, activism, black workers movements, etc., “Blacks were repeatedly trapped into alliances as dependent clients.” He describes this dependency in relation to

racial minorities' ability to influence public policy. Specifically, he asserts, "racial minorities can influence major public policies only when their agenda is sufficiently acceptable to one or both of the major white capitalist parties, which in turn assimilate the proposals into their political program for their own purposes (*How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, 8). Here, he attempts to describe the kinds of discursive white hetero-patriarchal structures that reinforce economic and political dependencies upon not only Blacks; but also, as supported by the discussion of Weeks earlier in this chapter, on women as well wherefrom their attempts to take authority and accountability in changing their conditions - or any other forms of action defined in the nomenclature of personal responsibility- are contingent on appeasing those whose agenda created those very conditions (8-9). Thus, dependency explained this way, points to a type of required or mandated reliance on the entities of oppression embedded in the resistance against them. To this end, self-regulation, even as it appears to offer autogenous forms of adjustment, recalibration and discipline for the purpose of self-improvement, it still depends on the dominate culture for its matrix.

The point I am making here is that considerations of race make visible a form of dependency that Ehrenreich's conjecture elicits. Albeit to say, as much as her claims appear to purport the empowerment of the low-wage worker, they fail to break from the logic that presumes this empowerment comes from those of the dominate class. She bases her claim on the notion that the worker's ability to have an opportunity for a better self-perception is dependent upon the perception that the more affluent classes have of her or him. In fact, it is the affluent class and not the low-wage working class that comprises her audience, even as she appears to invoke a course of action from the low-wage worker. Thus, the charge of the adjustment, recalibration, and discipline of the worker's feelings is dependent upon the very ones who currently generate the experiences that provoke the need for such modulation.

Conclusion

In the last page of the book, Ehrenreich forecasts: "Someday, of course, and I will make no predictions as to exactly when- they are bound to tire of getting so little in return and to demand to be paid what they're worth" (221). The logic behind her forecast draws from the well-worn arguments against Taylorism that assume an autonomy of the artisan and of skilled labor from the controls of capitalism, supposing that they in themselves embodied an autonomous subjectivity outside the valorization processes of capitalism: a notion premised in the idea of value being attributed to the individual worker as

opposed to the creation of it in the production processes of labor specifically in regard to socially necessary labor time. It further assumes that if the individuals were to take back their autonomy in labor, they would be able to fight against the low-wage practices of U.S. capitalism. And yet, what undergirds Ehrenreich's supposition are tangible significations of self-regulation within the larger cultural and socio-political norms of America that, in fact, appeal to the idea of the individual, who, according to Ehrenreich's conjectures must adapt its thinking in relation to its feelings of worthiness. In other words, the issue with wages in *Nick and Dime* is a personal matter, which Ehrenreich attempts to highlight through her confessions of her humiliation and guilt while undercover. She tries to record the impact of it by journaling her personal experiences and feelings in order to represent those who actually endure it. The frustration of not having enough money to secure affordable housing, the pains of hunger, the weariness of long and arduous work are all affects endured by the worker; however, the singularity by which she is able to reconstitute the historically informed experience and figure of the American worker to the present and personal experience and feelings of the individual and to focus the issue with wages at the center, bares the markings of the precept of self-regulation of this late stage of capital production. For not only does it represent itself as an object that is used to shed light on aspects of working systems in American that are relegated invisible; it also embodies a language and rhetoric that positions the individual or rather the illusive feelings of the individual as a priori for questions of wages even as it transcends the individual, having instead the capacity to exercise forms of social control, particularly, in the context of U.S. capital production and accumulation. In essence, Ehrenreich's attempt to promote the idea of creating opportunities for the possibility of generating a different, if not better, feeling of self worth, as a necessity to challenge the crisis with wages in the U.S. at the dawn of the 21st century (implicating not just the low-wage class; but also, the professional class as well), represents, in a most compelling way, sentimentalities of accountability and blame that place the onus of adjusting, disciplining, and recalibrating the self on the individual with the intended purpose of enforcing the requisite of self-regulation in accordance with the ideology of responsibility of this late stage of capital production- an ideology, which I have discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, that seeks, in the words of Kathi Weeks and David Harvey, to relieve the state and capitalism of the liability of "social cost of reproduction" and to place the responsibility of it solely on the individual. To this end, we are forced to face a rather perplexing

moment in Ehrenreich's work that is in many ways indicative of America's cultural responses to the crisis with work.

CHAPTER 3: THE QUESTION OF GENDER EQUALITY AND THE SELF-REGULATION OF FEMININITY IN THE FILMS, *WORKING GIRLS* AND *THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA*

Gender Equality: A Personal Matter

Katherine Turk, in the book *Equality on Trial: Gender and Rights in the Modern Workplace* (2016) notes that there is a current trend in American culture regarding work that shifts the matter of equality in relation to gender from inquiries of systemic forms of discrimination to that of individual and personal experiences. She cites the 2011 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the class action lawsuit against Wal-Mart by its women employees as an example of this shift. To detail the significance of it, she recounts that the case involved approximately 1.5 million women employees of Wal-Mart, who claimed to have been systemically discriminated against in forms that include “lower pay, diminished opportunities for promotion, and sexist workplace culture.”²¹ Turk informs that any serious legal claim the plaintiffs had was swiftly dismissed by the courts based on the presumption that “they [the plaintiffs] did not share enough commonalities to constitute a single class,” which she contributes to “the law’s tightening focus on discrimination as an interpersonal problem.” She emphasizes her point by quoting Justice Antonin Scalia, who states that he “rejected the notion that sex discrimination they [the plaintiffs] described constituted adequate ‘glue holding...together’ the ‘literally millions of employment decisions’ the women experienced as individuals.” What this lawsuit and Justice Scalia’s corresponding statement signal for Turk is a prevailing tendency in America’s legal system “to interpret sex discrimination as a matter of personal sexist intent, overlooking the institutional sexism embed within the workplace system” (205).²² In other words, what Turk exposes is that both indicate, to some degree, that gender equality in American society gets viewed as an issue that must be addressed at the level of “the personal” and that such a shift, as evident in the case cited above, constitute a kind of rhetoric that seem to reflect America’s sentiments concerning women and work.

²¹ Wal-Mart Stores, INC. v. Dukes et al., decided June 20, 2011. The company was accused of violating Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 against their women employees.

²² To further her claim about the shift, she briefly references another court case brought before the U.S. District Court by a group of West Coast Walmart women employees (a smaller class-action lawsuit than the one discussed above) two years after the Supreme Court ruling. She informs that the judge presiding over this lawsuit, Judge Charles Breyer, takes a similar stance to that of Justice Scalia by ruling that “the plaintiffs had illuminated ‘attitudes of gender bias held by managers,’ but they had not proven that ‘intentional discrimination was a general policy affecting the entire class.’” She notes that Breyer also stated that “the women could sue Walmart as individuals, but not collectively,” which Turk viewed as yet another way for the courts to undermine the mobilizing power of a class of working women for the project of individualizing gender discrimination (205).

However, Turk's reference to this concrete moment in contemporary American history regarding collective efforts by women to fight for their labor rights points to more than just the legal ramifications of sex discrimination and the currency of gender equality in American courts; it signals a type of fallout within political and cultural domains of American society as well. For instance, when Turk discusses the working class women's movement against gender inequality in contrast to that of the professional class's who, as she notes, typically define it in terms of "the pressures of work on women in America," she observes that the latter views their struggles with the strains and demands of work not too dissimilar to the sentiments expressed in America's legal system. In fact, Turk goes as far as to say that this class of women, whom she categorizes as "white-collar feminists," have "advocated more individualistic responses to the pressures that shape their lives" and in effect, have sought and advised "personal solutions, admonishing women to 'lean in' to corporate jobs, adopt new 'confidence' and 'self-assurance,' and stop making 'unconscious mistakes' that 'sabotage their careers'" (206).²³ This response, Turk observes, has become a basin for an industry of literary and cultural productions, including but not limited to memoirs, self-help books, and popular culture forms of literature and film premised on not only capturing "the challenges" and "collective memory" of the women struggling to make it in the professional world of work; but, one that produces a discourse on ways to consciously and autogenously adjust, recalibrate, and discipline, or more concisely, self-regulate to this world as well. In effect, Turk uses both the legal case and the responses of the "white-collar feminists" to show how each pushes the struggles of working-class women, specifically within the context of the workplace, at the fringes of what constitute individual and personal concerns. It is from this stance that my investigation of work as consolidated in ideas of responsibility, seeks out self-regulation (or the remediation of an individual's character or behavior- signified in the current language of gender equality expressed in Turk's discussion of the courts and the "white collar feminist" approach- to the present order of work within American culture and society)

²³ Turk makes a specific reference to Debora L. Spar's book, *Wonder Women: Sex, Power, and the Quest for Perfection*, as one of the many examples of "a new cottage industry of memoirs and self-help books that capture the challenges –and even the collective misery-endured by the women who broke the glass ceiling" (206). In addition, she also indirectly references other books, such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* that are widely popular in circles concerned with women breaking the glass ceiling under the neoliberal age of capital production. The significance of these texts for Turk is that their attempts at capturing the challenges and misery that women endure do not push up against the hegemony of American work culture regarding gender equality in the workplace, concluding instead that it supports and maintains it.

and its function in the cultural imagination. By this, I reference the 'lean in' types of approaches that require one to 'adopt 'new confidence,' and 'self-assurance,' and stop making 'unconscious mistakes'; in other words, approaches that necessitates one's adjustment, recalibration, and discipline of the faculties of her consciousness to "fit a white, male heterosexual, able-bodied model"- a model that according to Turk, "[urges] women to adjust to the world of work as it is" (206). Along these same lines, her stance also furnishes me an occasion to cogitate self-regulation as a strategy to read American cultural responses to contemporary matters of gender equality and the woman question in the context of the workplace through the medium of films. Out of this, I attempt to explore the following questions: what meanings might we derive about the ways American culture conceptualizes and imagines women in the workspace from films that relate and imagine realities and conflicts women face in this space? What role does the Hollywood narrative play in interpretations of gender equality and issues with work largely in terms of self-regulation? How does it influence conversations of gender equality in contemporary discourses of work and women? Last, and more generally, in what ways might this strategy of reading and analyzing literary and cultural productions add to interpretations and questions about American cultural responses to work?

Reading Self-Regulation in Woman in the Workplace Imaginaries

The objective in this chapter is to point out various contemporary representations that illustrate this widely unexamined occurrence of individualistic approaches to conceptualizing, examining, or imagining work and I use them to explore the questions above in relation to gender equality within the context of self-regulation as they are played out in the fictionalization of America's workplaces. In particular, I analyze narratives such as the films *Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, 1988) and *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel, 2006) for their use of the romantic-comedy theme of white women upward mobility in the context of the workplace, where the tensions between working-class and professional class women are played out. These films are particularly important to the overall analysis for several reasons. First, given the popularity of these films, they stand as a kind of representation of popular media forms that are typically interrogated for "widely disseminat[ing] a set of assumptions" that are believed to give new space to conceptions of femininity, generally depicted in terms of femaleness and sexuality, through which questions of equality and empowerment anchored in ideas of self-regulation are posed (Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 1). Second, they exemplify the types of literary and cultural productions Turk identifies

in her observations for their attempt to capture the challenges and collective memory of women struggling to make it in the professional world of work out of which narratives and images of women adjusting, recalibrating, and disciplining themselves to this world (i.e. adopting new confidence, self-assurance, and ways to stop making unconscious mistakes) are forged. Last, and more specific to the overall project at hand, they provide an occasion, when analyzing their content and their conventional uses of the omniscient point of view, to advance an argument about self-regulation beyond an examination of the first person point of view narrative in forms of witnessing and confessing that I took up in the previous chapters of this dissertation and through which I attempted to argue mobilizes self-regulation in order to conceptualize the issues of and solution to America's work crisis. From this perspective, they furnish an opportunity to substantiate a needed caution against parochial readings of self-regulation, as a mere projection or even production of subjectivities; although, admittedly, to make such a distinction proves quite difficult given that the term seems to typically elicit such interpretations. The point here, however, is to show that self-regulation is as universalizing and secular as the neoliberal ideology of which one can trace its roots. In other words, it epitomizes the zeitgeist of the current social conditions of capital production even as it appears to remain indiscernible in methods of interpretation and signification. With this mind, I will analyze these films in my interrogation of self-regulation to inquiry how might they too be read in similar fashion to that of the other mediums (i.e. immigrant literature and undercover reporting) discussed in the previous chapters of this dissertation for the ways self-regulation shows up in the conceptualization of the crisis with work and what might we draw from such a reading of them as it pertains to not only the subject of equality that has been, as Turk points out, legally and culturally constituted a personal matter; but also, to the ways they delineate concerns with gender equality through the idealization of individual volition that lays charge the facilitation of a course of action and seeks its expression from within the faculties of consciousness to questions of femininity. More directly, I will explore self-regulation in these films in relation to the ways gender equality gets designated a personal matter and configured a contested site of femininity, wherefrom both the issues that are thought to define and the solutions that are imagined to resolve America's work crisis- a crisis that in this context defines, on the hand, the instability that women face in America's work system, including but not limited to precarious employment; low and unequal pay; sexist workplace practices; and restricted opportunities for

promotion; and, on the other hand, the volatility it invokes in the American cultural imagination about working women- are entertained.

Femininity or What Advances the Question of Gender Equality

It is necessary to first get a sense of the relationship between femininity and gender equality to grasp the function of self-regulation in discourses of work and women. To do so, I turn briefly to conversations about femininity that are taking place most fervently in the postfeminist field. As I argue, femininity often times get posited as a principal site of anxieties for women in the workplace, whereby issues that typically emerge from social relations between women and men in this space are somehow classified as personal or internal matters for women (and among women) defined in terms of their femaleness or sexuality and are said to be addressed at that level. This can be seen most prevalently in contemporary discussions of femininity within postfeminist camps that focus on representations of women in popular media. In fact, since its emergence in 1980s, postfeminism has been quite attentive to the project of re-articulating femininity for the purpose of forging new spaces to rethink feminism and prolific in the production of chick flicks and literature where they employ femininity to focalize the imaginary concerning women's struggles in the workplace (see Suzanne Ferriss and Mallor Young 2008; Stéphanie Genz 2009; Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra 2007).

Arguably, this could be viewed as a response to the neoliberal restructuring of work in the U.S. that shifted capital production from factory industries to that of service production and information and technology processing and that also saw to the increase in the number of woman in America's workforce. Studies of working American women, such as the widely recognized and most recently dated comprehensive one done by Sharlene Hesse Biber and Gregg Lee Carter in 2005 offer data taken from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics that states that between the years of 1970 and 2002, the percentage of women in the paid labor force increased from approximately 45 percent to just under 60 percent (18). Even though Biber and Carter's data account only for the late 20th century and early millennial years, the 2017 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data report indicates that this percentage as late as 2016 has remained relatively the same.²⁴ Biber and Carter also posit that even with the increase of women in the

²⁴ See U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*. April 2017. Report 1065.

workforce, women still get the lesser paying jobs and continue to carry the bulk of the responsibilities of the family on their shoulders (xvi). This, they tell us, accounts for earning inequalities, and here I would add a plethora of other disparities that contribute to a fervid angst among women concerning questions of sameness, fairness, and egalitarianism in the workplace (xvi).

Postfeminist scholars and critics alike, who have been quite outspoken about their angst in their inquiry into how to characterize the new generation of feminism in regard to questions of women and gender equality, note that this has translated for the new generation of feminist the need to veer away from earlier feminist thought of femininity and gender equality that focused sharply on gender biases in both domestic and institutional forms for the project of taking on more “lean in” type of approaches that Turk points out as well as ideas of ‘individual and life style’ choices (Genz and Bradon 2009; Sheryl Sandberg 2003). This veering away, as Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Bradon tell us in their introductory text to postfeminism, where they cite a number of scholars and critics on this topic, has pinned femininity as central site of contention in postfeminism (and feminism). They note that for proponents of postfeminism, femininity represents a space to re-invent an identity of self-empowerment and self-determination branded in ideas of the ‘feminine’ that are organized around ‘sexual confidence and autonomy’ outside the older paradigms of feminism and for its opponents, it stands as a marker for a ‘depoliticized feminist movement’ driven by capitalism, positioned to protect patriarchy, and propagated by popular media through which expressions of femaleness and sexuality constitute sites of agency where gender equality can be addressed (See Tasker and Negra 2007; Genz and Bradon 2009 12). Even though Genz and Bradon take a rather neutral stance on the subject of femininity in postfeminist discourse and imagination, given that they conceive postfeminism to be a response to and “emblematic of the paradoxes of modern-day politics and culture, seeking to reconcile feminist ideas of female emancipation and equality, consumerist demands of capitalist societies and media-friendly depictions of feminine/masculine empowerment,” they acknowledge that femininity from whichever standpoint interfaces with neoliberalism’s propagation of ideas of personal responsibility in the framework of self-regulation, which I have argued pressures workers to adjust and discipline themselves to the restructuring of America’s work (41). In fact, they remark, “The focus on femininity/sexuality as an avenue to agency is seen to be representative of a neo-liberal society that constructs individuals as self-determining and free”

being that “postfeminism [...] is part of a neo-liberal political economy that relies on the image of an ‘enterprising self’ characterized by initiative, ambition, and personal responsibility” (130; 166). What Genz and Bradon seem to be pointing out here, even if subtly, is that there is an aspect of postfeminism’s response to contemporary matters of work that focuses on femininity within postfeminist discourses as it relates to gender equality and women in the workplace and that such a focus hinges on ideas of self-regulation that appear to offer new sites of agency framed in existentialist ideas of inventing a sovereign self.

However, such an approach to the question of gender equality proves quite insular to say the least. It does not consider femininity, gender equality, and women in the workplace outside of a specific privileged lens. In fact, Genz and Bradon’s conception and readings of femininity and its various interpretations specifically as it relates to neoliberalism’s reliance on self-enterprising images are, by and large, interred in middle class whiteness. This may explain why Genz admits in her more focused text on femininity and popular media, titled *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*, to using her study to “imagine alternative modes of identity formation for white, heterosexual femininity” (5). Postfeminist critics such as Tasker and Negra argue that this is customary of postfeminism given that it “is white and middle class by default” (2). They associate this specifically with postfeminist fiction of which they believe formulates questions about femininity as it relates to the economy in terms of “choice” rather than of necessity (2). In fact, they deduce that femininity within postfeminist thought, even as it is said to breathe new life into “social and economic fields of Western cultures” that are believed to suffer fatigue, gets imagined within homogenized forms of middle class whiteness (9). It is from this imaginary, they contend, that, “Postfeminist fictions frequently set aside both evident economic disparities and the fact that the majority of women approach paid labor as an economic necessity rather than a ‘choice’” (2). What undergirds this for them, similar to Turk’s argument about white-collar feminists who see gender equality and issues with work largely in terms of adjusting and disciplining the self to “fit a white, male heterosexual, able-bodied model,” is that there is a smoothing out of the complex textures of racial and class issues in the workplace under a universal “white” experience from which all matters of gender equality are assumed and all solutions that rely on ideas of self-determination, personal responsibility, and choice are regarded. This is particularly important because, in one sense, it allows us to discern how the rather dense and diverse

question of gender equality gets framed by self-regulation's need for a universalism and how this universalism channels the polemics of femininity to route and demarcate the problem and solution to America's work crisis that millions of women face. Alongside this, it normalizes the ways the films, which I shall engage below, are centered on the travails and success of white woman, who are posited as representative of the entire group interest of working women. In other words, it repositions inquiries about socio-economic relations of women and men to the concerns of a fairly stable economic class of women, who see their problems chiefly in terms of how they, as women, must self-regulate to the standards of their profession in order to achieve upward mobility in the workplace.

Femininity, Gender, and Work

However, Robin Truth Goodman, in her discussion of femininity in the book, *Gender Work*, makes evident the very real force of neoliberal political economy on the production of femininity, particularly in regard to the ways that self-regulation masks the economic imperative to produce an ideal self that follows the rubric set forth by middle class whiteness. Although her broader project seeks to examine the ways gender within contemporary critical theory and literature has been displaced onto class and production, her more detailed discussion focuses on femininity and its method in clearing "a symbolic space through which the 'free reproductive labor' of actions, traits, sensibilities, and affects linked to gender can be reconceived in capitalizable form" as well as its role in the "ongoing primitive accumulation that continues to separate workers from their production." In essence, Goodman sees femininity as a project for capital accumulation in a manner that includes the restructuring of work in feminized forms and the commodification of feminine traits. Femininity, in this sense, according to Goodman, "has less to do with bodies than with the way capital is calling subjects into 'feminine' positions from which it can extract profit," given that such positions usually ensure that capital consumes the surplus made available through the disparity of pay between men and women (2).²⁵

²⁵ In *Gender Work*, Goodman states that women nationally receive 77 percent on the dollar. However, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) just posted an article on their website titled, "The Simple Truth about the Gender Pay Gap" (Spring 2017) that provides the following numbers regarding the wage gap: White women make a ratio of 80 percent compared to white men, while Asian women make 85 percent, Black women 63 percent, and Latina women 54 percent. These percentages were quoted from data collected from a 2015 Census Bureau American Community Survey.

While her observations are not broadly different than those of Genz and Bradon or any other postfeminist who sees postfeminism as “a part of a neo-liberal political economy that relies on the image of an ‘enterprising self’ characterized by initiative, ambition, and personal responsibility;” it is clear that Goodman veers away from positing femininity chiefly in a space where women’s struggles and experiences with work can be observed outside of capitalism (*Postfeminism* 166). Instead, femininity, for Goodman, is “invented and manufactured for profit” and not only in the ways it feminizes work; but also, the ways it feminizes women and here, she draws on Ann Gray’s claims about the typical characterization of “the feminine,” in terms such as flexibility, nurturing, and intuition to note how femininity is made marketable and sellable “as a product and a value for management” wherefrom women can generate “an ideal self for work” (3). She quotes Gray directly to emphasize that, “[w]omen are encouraged to see themselves as a project, their bodies and their selves as a site of production” (in reference to various areas of business and culture including print and digital media that elicit the change of everything from hair and dress styles to cooking and sexual practices) and that they are required to “self-manage” to be successful in such an endeavor. Through her direct quote of Gray, Goodman is able to point out how femininity becomes the site from which women are required to transform and “self-manage” in ways that make them feminine according to the logic of capital production and accumulation. She explains that “[s]uch ‘femininity’ is created or built through self-help, shopping, advertising, editorials, marketing, and training” (3-4). What is at stake for Goodman, here, is the “relationship between the rise of corporate power under neoliberalism and the femininity that continues to misrecognize those who are called to be subjects in its image” (3). And of this, she references Freud’s essay titled, “Femininity,” and his theory of symbolic exchange and uses them to articulate the construction of this image within modern “corporate ‘common sense’,” which she argues, in reference to Joan Riviere, requires “women to masquerade as ‘women’ in the image of the corporation” (4).²⁶ From her articulation of Freud and of the corporate common sense factor, she challenges us to see that women are not entering the workforce with readymade attributes of femininity for work that match their nature proclivities; rather that femininity is

²⁶ In 1929 Joan Riviere published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* the essay, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” where she wrote the often-quoted passage on the ‘woman masquerading as woman’ in reference to her claims that femininity can be assumed as nothing more than the “conception of womanliness as a mask” (4). See <http://mariabuszek.com/mariabuszek/kcai/DadaSurrealism/DadaSurrReadings/RiviereMask.pdf> for PDF version.

being generated and employed, in layman terms, to lower the cost of labor by requiring women, as much as men, to adjust, recalibrate, and discipline themselves to the retooling of America's work system. While some may read Goodman's work for what it may bring to bear on conversations of subjectivities and agency in relation to the feminization of work, it is apparent that Goodman's discussion about femininity conveys the precepts of self-regulation as it relates to the adjustment and discipline of the self, which, in part, is arguably one of the major guiding principles of capital and labor relations in the U.S. since the 1970s.

I recognize that femininity is reflective of the types of projects each of the scholars attempt to take on as they try to grapple with questions of feminism, postfeminism, and gender. In truth, to try to wrangle the varying operations of the term taken up by each of them would prove to be not only a hasty, but an unnecessary task. For, despite the various ways femininity gets constituted, the commonplace sentiment is that it functions within the (personal) responsibility mandates of this late state of capitalism that purpose self-regulation as a necessary precept for the repositioning of questions of gender equality in relation to concerns with women and work. For this reason, despite the various ways femininity is engaged, discussed, or intersected in this chapter, my argument regards it principally as a contested site where we can see how gender equality gets designated a personal matter and how this designation positions both the problems and the solution to America's work crisis in America's cultural imaginary within narratives about internal struggles among women and within the woman.

Matriarchal Rites Initiation Myth and the Women in the Workplace Stories

These precepts that Goodman puts forth in her discussion of femininity are shared by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, who articulate them as being "anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self" (2). They also assert that these precepts are mobilized in postfeminist culture, with its objective "to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer" and to "[enact] fantasies of regeneration and transformation that also speak to a desire to change" (2 and 22). Tasker and Negra further inform that these objectives are a function of "market populism" and thus, "supports and is supported by the individualist, acquisitive, and transformative values of postfeminism" (7). They explain that since "[p]ostfeminism frequently imagines femininity as a state of vitality," it "in all its guises posits the contemporary as surpassing feminism, leaving it behind" (11). In

short, Tasker and Negra see femininity in the frame of a culture and ideology that turn feminism into a commodity and a (re)production of this late stage of capitalism while it simultaneously, renders it irrelevant, if not obsolete. They argue that this shows up in the postfeminist imagination in the form of a “postfeminist heroine” who “is vital, youthful, and playful while her opposite number, the ‘bad’ female professional, is repressive, deceptive, and deadly” (9). In accordance with this view and considering that both films being analyzed in this chapter visibly contain this dichotomy of working women of the postfeminist imagination, then it is not too far reaching to analyze them for their focus on the conflict between the progressive female and the atavistic one. However, what is at stake is that such analyses may take little or no notice of the ways the postfeminist imagination in the creation of this working woman dichotomy and the ensuing conflict between these two categories of female makes possible the morphing of political advocacy for gender equality into tales of internal conflict both in regard to group interest (i.e. the internal struggle between classes and races of women) and the individual (i.e. the personal struggle of the woman who emerges as the postfeminist heroine and whose heroism is defined by her ability to demonstrate self-regulation in accordance with popular sentiments about working women in American culture).

However, when attending to this type of dichotomic orientation that they point to here, one cannot ignore that it also intersects with what one scholar called “the older remnant of ancient matriarchal rites of initiation” myth in which we are to see the contention between representational images of feminism/postfeminism in regard to the workplace in the frame of a younger generation of women struggling to move away from and against an older generation represented in the image of the naïve neophyte contending with the villainess expert professional female (Janet Brennan Croft 55). In more generous interpretations of this myth in relation to modern narratives of working women, as in the case of Janet Brennan Croft’s reading of *The Devil Wears Prada*, which largely references the Greek myth *Psyche*, such matriarchal rites of initiation are deemed necessary for the naïve neophyte to transform and mature. Croft asserts specifically that for the naïve neophyte to reach maturity, she must overcome every challenge and obstacle the villainess expert professional female places before her. Each time she does so, she gets closer to reaching her maturity and ultimately, claiming an integrity that surpasses that her predecessor (66-67).

Yet, what such interpretations fail to consider is the correlation between the maturation of the naïve neophyte and the paradigm of surpassing up or leaving behind the expert (villainess) professional female. In accordance with such myths, the woman who initiates the other into reaching maturity fails to meet the standards that she sets for the other. And by far, this is one of the most perplexing aspects of representational forms of such myths. Given that the expert professional female does not meet her own standards suggests that the standards are not really of her own making. Nevertheless, and I would offer that this gets at the heart of the perplexing aspect of representations of the myth, the expert (villainess) professional female who is surpassed and rendered obsolete by the naïve neophyte somehow becomes her “fixed center.” Oddly enough, as Croft explains in her analysis of *The Devil Wears Prada*, she becomes that “from which,” the mentored naïve neophyte (in her reference to Andy Sachs, the postfeminist heroine and maturing woman in the film), “journeys away and back in this phase of her life, each time coming back better, more skilled, having learned something, and perhaps storing up wisdom for her own eventual turn as a mentor” (Croft 66). Yet, the incongruity of the expert (villainess) professional female being both surpassed and fixed-center allows only for a focus on the issue of work and women to loop in a paradox of the myth, while leaving unclear from where the rules and standards were set in the first place.

Up to this point, I have taken into account the arguments put forth by postfeminist and their critics alike, with the objective of probing discourses about femininity and its nature and function in relation to contemporary conjectures about gender equality in the American cultural imagination. With caution, I explore these discourses without purposing them to add to or advance conversations of femininity regarding the particularities and criticisms of feminism and postfeminism. If I have done otherwise, it is merely incidental. Rather, what I hope to engage at this juncture and to use to further my discussion is the ways the films in question might be read for their use of the dichotomic categories that generate the heroine’s adversary in the image of an ambitious, deceitful, bad female professional; their prioritization of femininity as the central crisis for working women in the U.S.; and their reliance on the production of an “enterprising self” that replicates the social and political strategies of Hollywood since the 1980s in their attempt to merely gesture at the real experiences of working women to pin down and interpret the function of self-regulation in the configuration of the films’ narratives.

The Hollywood Narrative: Femininity and Women in the Workplace

If we regard Elizabeth G. Traube's book, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in the 1980s Hollywood Movies*, we learn that Hollywood, toward the end of the 20th century, colluded with new right conservatism to reconstitute the supremacy of patriarchy in America's myth and imagination about working women. As she informs, "During the 1980s, Hollywood joined New Right leaders in directing socially rooted discontents against independent, upwardly mobile women." She goes on to explain that through this collusion, "[m]ovies as well as political discourse attacked uncontrolled, ambitious women as the cause of a moral crisis that, given its definition called for a strong, authoritarian patriarch" (20). Carolyn Anderson furthers Traube's observations of the Hollywood narrative by arguing that since that time, there has been an emphasis within public rhetoric and imagination on work in terms of meritocracy. She further informs that this emphasis on meritocracy posits ideologies of class mobility within notions of "success and failure in individual terms." The resulting effect, she explains, is that, "[c]onflict was instead routinely dramatized as personal struggles of individuals" and not in the context of social relations of gender in the workplace or in the contemporary relationship between labor and capital (159). Thus, when analyzing *Working Girl* and *the Devil Wears Prada*, we see that the films focus on the tension between the naïve neophyte (postfeminist heroine) and the expert professional woman (bad professional female) and glosses over the other social relational aspect, including institutional gender biases that contribute to the main characters' struggle with upward mobility. This strategy allows the films to project a narrative that dramatizes the protagonists' struggles as personal ones, played out in their conflict with their female bosses. So much so that we are confronted in these films with a kind of disavow of any form of signification that points to the fundamental crisis of gender equality premised in the unequal treatment in pay, advancement opportunities, and sexist workplace practices that has marked a rather long history of gender biases in the workplace. Instead, they call for us to see their heroines' desperate ambition for upward mobility as restricted to their aptitude to adhere and adjust to authoritarian patriarchy cloaked by the effigy of a bad professional female outlined in the character of their bosses and rivals. In fact, the males in the films do not pose any real threat to the heroines' journey in advancing their career, given that in most cases they are portrayed two-dimensionally.

***Working Girl* and the Hollywood Narrative**

Working Girl offers such an example. In the film, a Staten Island secretary (Tess McGill played by Melanie Griffin) quits a job working for a sexist boss and gets hired at a banking investment firm on Wall Street as an assistant to the firm's female manager, Katharine Parker (played by Sigourney Weaver). Although Tess is portrayed as the stereotypical secretary of the 1980s (i.e. big hair, excess make-up and jewelry, etc.), she sees Katharine as a mentor and a model for how she should reinvent herself to advance her career in mergers and acquisitions. However, she is quickly disabused of this when she finds out that Katharine plans to steal an idea about a merger deal she shares with her. This motivates Tess to broker the deal herself by posing as an executive, which she does successfully. In the process, she wins the heart of Jack Trainer, with whom she partners to manage the deal and who she later discovers is Katharine's boyfriend. And it is this conflict that Tess has with Katharine and her own personal struggles with modeling the image of the professional woman that guide much of the film's narrative about working women in the late 20th century.

Against this background, the males in the film are portrayed as not posing any real threat to Tess's attempts to advance her career. While they are portrayed in some instances as voyeuristic or sexist, their more prominent presence is seen in the ways they help Tess authenticate her place in upper management. In fact, the film focuses largely on the more honorable and genteel qualities of men as portrayed in such characters as Jack Trainer and Oren Trask, which are used to facilitate the validation of Tess's intellectual (and at times, sexual) deftness in her attempts to advance her career. For example, despite Tess's deceit in posing as an executive at the same firm where she works as an assistant, Jack backs her in her plea to Oren, the owner of Trask Industries, that she, in fact, originated the idea for the radio investment deal on behalf of his company and Oren vindicates her as the originator of the deal by hiring her for an "entry level" managerial position in his company. Moments in the film when she is confronted with sexism, as in the case with her first boss, David Lutz (Oliver Platt), who denies her the opportunity for a junior training position and offers instead to set her up on an interview with a Wall Street executive, knowing that upon their meeting the executive will solicit her for sex or her live-in boyfriend Mick Dugan (Alex Baldwin), who gives her lingerie as a birthday present every year (according to a

comment Tess says to him about the gift) and cheats on her with a woman she knows, she easily bypasses it by making the choice to quite the job and end the relationship.

At the same time, the film gives primacy to femininity in the conflict Tess faces as she climbs the corporate ladder. This primacy, on the one hand, sets up the dichotomy between Tess and Katharine; and, on the other hand, dramatizes the-woman-in-the-workplace scenario within the framework of Tess's ability to self-regulate according to ideas of femininity that make palatable her ambition and striving for upward mobility- an ambition and striving that simultaneously demonstrate a willingness to adjust, recalibrate, and discipline herself to a femaleness and sexuality that pacify the public's imagination about working women and that maintains the supremacy of patriarchy in the workplace. Through the primacy of femininity, the film conceives Tess in accordance with Tasker and Negra's assertion of the postfeminist heroine that is playful, youthful, and vital and positions Katharine, the 'bad, repressive, and deceitful' female professional. As such, Tess's development and transformation into a professional follow the paradigm of the maturation myths discussed above. In the film, Katharine puts forth obstacles to hinder Tess's progress: She lies to her about how Jack responded to Tess's idea, she subtly reinforces Tess's lower rank in relation to her own, and later, uses Tess's lower rank to brand her as an imposter so as to raise doubt in Jack and Oren about Tess's ability to originate such a deal. In several scenes, Tess is made to act out her low-ranking position for Katharine. For example, after making the suggestion to use a trendy new approach of serving dim sum at business gatherings, Tess is seen passing out food at a function hosted by Katharine. Even though Katharine thanks Tess for serving at her function and confides in her how to deal with sexist male colleagues, she completely leaves the task of serving the guest to Tess. Another more notable example is when Katharine, while getting help from Tess to try on skiing boots for her trip, confides in Tess about her plans to convince her lover to marry her. In the course of her confession, Katharine looks down at Tess who stares up at her with dewy eyes and states, to counter any doubt Tess has about the marriage proposal she anticipates, "Tess, you know, you don't get anywhere in this world by waiting for what you want to come to you; you make it happen. Watch me, Tess. Learn from me." In this scene, Katharine situates herself as Tess's paragon, which according to the upward angling of the camera requires that Tess takes a bow to her. This helps to shed light on other moments in the film when we see Katharine diminishing Tess to a lower rank. Such examples include calling a hotel in

Germany to reserve a high-end suite after Tess failed to do so or having her run personal errands. Yet, the most demonstrative of this is when she barges into the boardroom where the Trask Industries radio investment deal is being finalized to expose Tess as a secretary in order to incriminate Tess as an imposter and not the originator of the merger idea. Keeping true to the maturation narratives, Tess overcomes the obstacles and ranking set forth by Katharine. Needless to say, this also cements Katharine as the ultimate bad professional female within the American imagination about women and work.²⁷

This relational dynamic between Tess and Katharine is congruent with the Hollywood narrative of the 1980s that, at one and the same time, idealizes (and romanticizes) individual mobility and advancement and vilifies independent and ambitious working women. Traube, in her chapter on the American myth of the self-made man and Hollywood's demonization of women, gives insight into this by relating the story of the film to "the old moralistic critique of decadent leisure" (111). She contends that the film redirects the audience's attention from Katharine's farsighted and independent business qualities to her decadent and excessive behavior. She references the scenes when Katharine has what appears to be a party in her hospital room after suffering an injury while skiing in Europe. Traube asserts that both the scene in Katharine's hospital room where we see doctors and other patients partying and flirting with her along with her choice to go on a vacation even though she had already begun putting together the Trask Industries acquisition deal prompted by an idea she steals from Tess all demonstrate her decadent leisure. She also points out how the film quickly debunks the image of an independent Katharine by having her admit to living with her parents. Tess, on the other hand, according to Traube, is depicted as hard-working and tenacious. She not only finagles her way into working with executives she would otherwise assist; but also, labors in transforming herself to infiltrate their world and to convince them that she belongs there.

This may also explain how it is that despite Tess's calculating, and at times, reckless effort to advance her career, she remains the heroine of the film or how it comes to be that neither her duplicitous

²⁷ Susan Faludi notes in her book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* how the ad for the film called Katharine Parker "the boss from hell." Since this time, Katharine Parker remains in the memory of American cinema, feminist conversations about women in films, and discourses of professional women as the prototypical villainess female boss. See Judith P. Miller's "The Devil Wears Prada and Working Girl: Sympathy for the Devil" (2007) and Elizabeth Traube's *Dreaming Identities* (1992) to name a few.

nor manipulating behavior typecasts her repressive, deceitful, or deadly. Which is to say nothing of how, in accordance with the heroine position she is granted, the scenes when she wears Katharine's clothes without permission, stays in her home, goes through her personal belongings, or uses her office space as her own are seen as altogether necessary and thus, excusable. As it so happens, her behavior is excused not based on class relations or morality; but rather on her star quality, individual action, and go-get-it attitude. Thus, the excuse she gives to Trask about having to use back channels to advance herself, after he questions her about being silent when she is exposed in the boardroom by Katharine is well received. In fact, when she explains, "Well, no one was going to listen, sir, not to me. I mean you can bend the rules plenty once you get upstairs, but not while you're trying to get there. And if you're someone like me, you can't get there without bending the rule," Trask gives a look of understanding and offers her a job in his company. Contrarily, Katharine receives a reprimand from Trask and Jack for her deceitful behavior: Katharine is neither granted a pardon, affection, or a job offer like Tess. Instead, she is reduced to Tess's critique of her physical appearance or as Traube pins it in her discussion of this moment in the film, to her sexual appearance referenced in the insult, "boney ass," -which is also repeated by Trask, who uses it to buttress his threat in seeking her termination. The irony, however, is that Tess's duplicitous behavior is not too dissimilar to Katharine's given that she discovers Katharine's plans to steal the idea she shared with her by going through Katharine's home computer, phone messages, and personal recorded dictations. It stands to reason, then, that Tess and Katharine could be easily seen as equally deceitful and yet, because of Tess's endogenous desire to transform and adjust herself to move upwardly (in other words, produce an ideal self for work) somehow, she represents, in the Hollywood narrative, the heroine of postfeminist imaginaries.

However, it is important to note that despite Traube's observations about the obvious class distinctions of Tess and Katharine depicted in the oppositional categories of excessive leisure and hard-work, it would be erroneous to see the film's portrayal of the tension between them through the lens of class conflict alone. As Benjamin DeMott notes in *The New York Times* several years after the release of the film, "at their best, Hollywood's new-style 'class movie' nod at realities of social difference- and then go on to obfuscate them." He uses *Working Girl* as an example, arguing that despite the realities of upward mobility for women, the film sidesteps them by focusing on Tess's desire as the locus for her

ability to climb the ladder of success. He asserts, “Tess’s desire flies her straight up to a managerial perch, allowing her to become, almost effortlessly, all she can be: no problem, few barriers, class dismissed.”

Taking DeMott’s assertion into account, I argue that Traube’s observations about the dichotomy between Tess and Katharine shed light on what Carolyn Anderson calls “the diminishing degrees of class separation” from which themes of “successful mobility” stand as the Hollywood narrative of working women. She reasons that this diminishment in class separation for themes of successful mobility, which she attributes to the Reagan-Bush years of public rhetoric that placed the weight of success and failure on individuality, are a production of the “Hollywood narrative- with its emphasis on stars and individual action, with its presumed dramatic necessity for conflict and change, with its obligation of a happy ending- [that] deeply encourages a dominant ideology of mobility and meritocracy” (159). With this in mind, it does not seem so strange that while Tess and Katharine are at odds for many reasons including class distinctions given that Tess is a working-class secretary (whose clothing, hair style, speech, and social life marks her as such) while Katharine is clearly of the upper class (having an ivy league education, a housekeeper, and a command of standard English and German languages), class does not necessarily create their tension. In fact, Tess imitates Katharine: she disciplines herself for success by wearing Katharine’s clothing and patterning her speech, as detailed most in the scenes when Tess, while house-sitting for Katharine, dresses up in some of Katharine’s more expensive clothing and listens to her personal recordings to mimic her elocution. Moreover, Tess appears receptive to Katharine’s critique of her appearance. For instance, in the scene when Tess first meets Katharine to discuss the job duties and expectations for the secretary position, they have the following exchange:

Katharine: The way I look at it is that you are my link with the outside world; people’s impression of me starts with you... I consider us a team Tess, as such, we have a uniform-simple, elegant impeccable. ‘Dress shabbily, they notice the dress, dress impeccably, they notice the woman’ –Coco Chanel.

Tess: Uhm, how do I look?

Katharine: You look terrific. You might want to rethink the jewelry.

Certainly, their exchange depicts the ideal kinship of a female boss and her female employee. Katharine’s explanation of her rules and expectations seems to establish her as Tess’s mentor. She clues her in on the most renowned fashion designer’s ideas of dress to emphasize the importance of image and she

advises Tess to remove some of her jewelry. To further establish a model for and a bond with Tess, she explains their working relationship in terms of team work; noting that her image depends on Tess. Of course, the undertone of it relays a disapproval of Tess's appearance and Tess takes cue by immediately going to the restroom after their talk to remove some of her jewelry and make-up. The impact of it is further revealed when Tess ventures to set up the deal for Trask Industries at which time, she is shown changing her image by shortening her hair, toning down her make-up, and wearing less jewelry. The result is that she transforms her image to imitate that of Katharine's.

However, the twist here is that while the film shifts attention away from class distinctions and zeros in on the portrayal of an enterprising Tess, it also frames Tess's imitation of Katharine and other such professional women in a type of resistance in the form of emulation. Another way to put it, her imitation of them becomes an effort to match and/or surpass them fashioned in her willingness to discipline her adjustment in style and her recalibration of speech to a flare and flexibility that appeal to male supremacy in the workplace. By doing so, the film refocuses the question of gender equality away from the social relations of female-male in the workplace to that of the female-female relationship. To this end, Tess represents, for the film, a working woman who regulates her image in opposition to that of the "uncontrolled, ambitious women, who is said to be the "cause of a moral crisis" in American society. She takes on femininity in accordance with Hollywood's depiction of the modern feminist woman who possesses the intelligence for business and femaleness and sexuality congruent for generating an ideal image of femininity. Because of this, the film easily portrays Tess as winning out over Katharine's polished business etiquettes and getting "Katharine out of the way" (Traube 110).

The primacy of femininity in the films not only functions to ensure that Tess's ambitions and strivings do not offend male authority in America's work culture, but it does so by also relying on the romance between the heroine and her hero (i.e. Tess and Jack). It amenably pacifies Jack's upper-working class masculine insecurities and appears ripe for the development of a connubial love. Arguably, the attention given to these two areas are what the film uses to set Tess apart from Katharine. Ignoring for a moment that Tess gets cues for her professional look and etiquette from Katharine, as discussed above, it is the film's emphasis on Tess's choice of attire and the appropriate time to wear the attire along with her receptiveness to Jack's need to assert his masculinity that frame her a modernized

nonthreatening working “girl” even as she simultaneously exemplifies the stereotypical sexualized woman. An example of this is in one of the most referenced scenes of the film: the initial encounter between Tess and Jack. In order to scout out Jack before meeting him about the merger she hopes to put together, she uses Katharine’s invite to attend a closing party hosted by the company where Jack works. She chooses to wear an elegant black party dress she confiscates from Katharine’s closet, assessing, as she explains to her friend, Cyn, that “It’s simple, elegant and yet makes a statement. Says to people, *confident*. A risk-taker. Not afraid to be noticed, then you hit them with your smarts.” This, of course, proves to be against the dress code of professional women as evident in the scene of the party, where Tess becomes quite aware from the attire worn by the other women that the dress she has chosen is inappropriate for the occasion. Yet, despite this, she is able to get the attention of Jack, even if unknowingly, who says to her without introducing himself, “I’ve been looking for you.” An exchange between them ensues with Tess asking, “Why? Do you know me?” and with Jack retorting, “No, no. I promised myself that when I saw you, I would get to know you. You’re the first woman I’ve seen at one of these damn things that dresses like a woman, not like a woman thinks a man would dress if he was a woman.” Through this exchange, Tess’s emulation of the professional woman makes her unique among them, at least in the eyes Jack Trainer. The irony of it that goes even over Jack’s head is that the dress Tess wears is his girlfriend’s; and yet, the timing of Tess’s choice to wear it distinguishes her for him from Katharine. Thus, it is only logical to assume that he sees Katharine in the myriad of women who dresses “like a woman thinks a man would dress if he was a woman.” In this vain, Tess then emerges as a woman who in her resistance to the normal appearances of professional women becomes for him the woman he has been looking for in the category of professional women: one “who dresses like a woman.” By having Jack state this, the film purposefully posits Tess as emblematic of the sort of woman men such as Jack, as well as the overall public, has been waiting for. She symbolizes the innocuous woman who exudes a femaleness and sexuality that ease the public’s otherwise discontent with the uncontrolled ambition women and that is said to be missing among the class of women with whom she seeks to imitate.

The significance of this in relation to gender equality and women in the workplace has everything to do with what Genz, in her analysis of this moment of the film, notes as “the Superwoman” persona of the postfeminist imagination. Genz reads the Tess and Jack moment as one in which Tess represents the

ambitious woman who seeks to have it all specifically in her ability to maintain a sense of femininity and sexuality as she advances professionally, unlike Katharine, her “bad” professional boss and who has generated a form of femininity necessary for and agreeable to authoritarian patriarchy in America’s myth and imagination about working women. Genz explains, “Unlike her more calculating and corrupt boss, Tess has preserved a ‘natural femininity/sexuality’ that allows her to steal Katharine’s boyfriend and rewards her with a management position and her own female secretary” (125). It is this unusual ‘natural’ femininity/sexuality, she argues that generates the polarization between the woman striving for upward mobility (or rather the naïve neophyte) and the bad female professional character, which I contend is tantamount to Tasker and Negra’s observations about the function of femininity in postfeminist imaginaries.

However, I caution against seeing Tess’s femininity/ sexuality as a thing she has preserved in her transformation. To see this through the lens of Tess’s natural femininity as she moves up the corporate ladder in ways that Katharine is not is quite problematic for several reasons. First, the idea that she preserves a form of femininity assumes she enters the story with one that has not been socially, historically, or politically informed and as such, although Genz uses quotations to indicate the legitimacy of the idea of a natural femininity/sexuality, her observation still nods at the notion that Tess intrinsically possesses a form of femininity and sexuality that stays with her even as she tries to reproduce herself for corporate work. Second, we can’t forget that Tess’s femininity/sexuality is as much a production of Katharine’s in forms of speech patterns and styles as it is her own, given that she takes her cues from Katharine. To this end, it is arguably safe to assume that whether intended or not, the film challenges its audience to see Tess’s transformation through her production of her corporate self as a regimen of patriarchal sensibility and authority. This is to say, in following the Hollywood narrative, Tess’s successful advancement is as much a matter of her ability to broker a deal as it is for her to self-regulate her femininity/sexuality to meet the desires of her male counterparts. Thus, when she says to Jack, “I have a head for business and a bod for sin...Is there anything wrong with that;” it is quite apparent that she wagers both in her labor to advance her career.

The head and body business of Tess’s striving to advance her career also points to another element of the film in its focus on femininity as the principal site of issue for working women. Unlike films

such as *The Wolf of Wall Street*, the fantasy of upward mobility in *Working Girl* pairs the mind and body as inseparable to the process of career advancement. Thus, types of work that would typically require the intellect of the working woman, somehow requires a mediation of her body as well; hence, the romantic comedy element of this film. Given this pattern, the path to Tess's success is as much a matter of her femaleness and sexuality serviceable for connubial love as it is her wit. This is particularly important to the film in that it makes Tess's ambitions pliable to Jack's need to sustain his masculinity in the wake of the advancement of professional working women. For example, in the scene when Tess hints at her plan to meet Trask to discuss the merger, Jack panics at the idea that she might leave him out of the deal or that she may not need his help at all. To ease his anxiety, Tess reassures him that she has no doubt in his abilities or in him as a man in general:

Jack: Are you trying to fly this thing without me?

...

I don't want to get buried under a little piece of tape

Tess: No one's trying to bury you under a little piece of tape.

Jack: Okay, so I've been in a little bit of a slump. I'm not afraid to admit it. There it is. But give me a break, here. Don't go leaving me out of it. If you got some doubts about me just say them to my face. Give me that much.

Tess: I don't have any doubts about you.

Jack: Okay. You need me, you know.

Tess: I mean any doubts about your abilities.

Jack: You need me at that meeting.

The double-meaning that shades the exchange here between Tess and Jack gives a hint that Tess's interest in Jack is not only professional but romantic. Therefore, the need to assure him of his place in the merger coincides with her assurance of his role in the male-female relationship within the domestic sphere. When analyzed alongside Katharine who fails to adjust her sexually aggressive and bold behavior, insisting instead that Jack enters into matrimony with her fashioned similar to a business merger, Tess does not disrupt the male-female relationship in the system of work. In fact, she does the opposite. She plays coy and yet, receptive to the typically male-female relationship. Even as she refuses to marry her working-class boyfriend, Mick; the connubial life is not outside her purview. Hence, the final scene in the film when we see Jack and Tess in his kitchen moving around each other in a familiar dance of matrimony with Jack handing her a lunchbox for her first day at work accompanying it with a kiss.

The Devil Wears Prada: The Hollywood Narrative Two Decades Later

This Hollywood narrative has not been repudiated in the twenty plus years since the release of *Working Girl*. The question of gender equality continues to find root in a Hollywood narrative that persists in dramatizing the conflict “as personal struggles of individuals” while maintaining an emphasis on “stardom and individual action’ along with a desire to produce a dramatic tale with a happy ending” (“Beyond the Stars” 159). Moreover, in keeping with the logic of self-regulation, it continues to locate the issues of and the redress to gender equality in sites of femininity seated in the rivalries between the films’ heroine and the villainess professional female. One notable example is the widely popular film, *The Devil Wears Prada*.²⁸ Premised in a coming-of-age tale based on Lauren Weisberger’s roman à clef with the same title, the film depicts a story about Andrea (Andy) Sachs (Anne Hathaway), a recent college graduate from Northwestern University with a degree in journalism who aspires to work as a journalistic writer in New York’s publishing scene; but, who must instead take a job at a high-end monthly fashion magazine as junior assistant to the notoriously pretentious and demanding editor in chief, Miranda Priestly played by Meryl Streep. Although Andy takes the job to earn income and to get the credentials and associations she needs to obtain work that suites her interests, she ultimately finds herself striving to meet Miranda’s unreasonable demands and to gain her approval. It is this conflict that Andy has with Miranda and her own personal struggles with trying to model the image that would ensure her ability to garner Miranda’s approval that direct much of the film’s narrative about women working in the millennial era.

In a show of social maturity, the film organizes Andy’s conflict around the notion that gender equality is no longer a ‘real’ issue for women. This may help to explain why little reference is made in the film about women struggling to advance in male dominated occupations or being subjected to the sexual whims of men. It also sheds light on why the film zeros in on the idea of successful executive women through characters such as Miranda Priestly (the film’s villain) and Jacqueline Follet (Miranda’s

²⁸ The eponymous film adapted from Lauren Weisberger’s roman à clef, *The Devil Wears Prada* has been widely recognized for giving its reader an inside view of the world of fashion and for employing a gossip like approach, as Kate Betts of the *New York Times* puts it. Weisberger, who worked at *Vogue* magazine for six months is said to have recounted some of her experiences working as an assistant to Anna Wintour, *Vogue*’s editor-in-chief depicted in the character, Miranda Priestly, chief-in-editor of *Runway* magazine in the film.

contemporary) in its attempts to portray women executives as widely recognizable in American cultural sentiments about working women in ways they were not some years prior. In fact, with a much greater emphasis than *Working Girl*, the film directs attention away from representations of men in power in demonstrative ways that make it quite plain that men do not pose any real threat to Andy's (or any of the other women's) upward mobility or job security. As a matter of fact, Andy never encounters sexist workplace experiences or the exercises of men's power over her at Runway. The only instance some semblance of the exercises of men's power in the workplace shows up in the film is when Irv Ravitz, the board member of Elias-Clarke, the corporate publication company that umbrellas Runway, and Christian Thompson, a freelance writer and editor, conspire albeit independent of each other to remove Miranda as editor in chief and to replace her with Jacqueline Follet. However, Miranda effortlessly outsmarts them by threatening Irv to take her connections with her and convincing Jacqueline to take a position as partner in an expanding fashion company, despite the repercussions it poses to Runway's art director, Nigel Kipling, who was first promised the partnership. Thus, owing to this type of shift in power dynamics, men in the film are merely minor, supporting characters. Hence, whatever degree their presence impacts the story, whether it takes the form of attempts to railroad Miranda and to criticize Andy's fashion style as Nigel does throughout the film, their influence on the women's lives is hardly measurable. Arguably, one could say that Nigel's relationship with Andy, in which he advises her to transform her physical appearance out of what Suzanne Ferriss describes as his "compassion" and "his impatience at her inability to do so herself" may count as a measurable influence and to some degree, that is debatable (52). Yet and still, his own vulnerability to the choices and whims of Miranda and his proximity to Andy as a mere co-worker diminish any real direct impact or power he could have on Andy's success or failure.

The diversion away from the types of male-female relational dynamics that usually define the woman's experience at work and that continue to be present in America's work institution as Turk informs allows the film to continue the primacy of femininity in the cinematic genre of working women. As such, the primacy of femininity works in this film to locate Andy's conflict in the challenges she faces adjusting and disciplining herself to the beauty standards of the job while trying not to lose herself in the process. By making femininity the main factor of her conflict, the film shifts the conflict and its solution away from the narrative of women trying to get ahead in a job where upward mobility is typically offered to men or

around the challenges women face in seeking to secure equal pay and job opportunity as well as beyond their experiences enduring and countering sexist workplace practices. Instead, it posits the conflict and the solution primarily within white collar feminists' concerns and the postfeminist imaginary that seek to mediate them through "lean in" types of approaches geared at requiring women to adopt new "confidence' and 'self-assurance,' and stop making 'unconscious mistakes' that sabotages their careers;" and that favor femininity "as an avenue to agency" for working women premised in the idea that through their femaleness and sexuality they can develop an "enterprising self characterized by initiative, ambition, and personal responsibility" (Genz and Bradon). This is quite evident in the adjustment and discipline measures Andy takes in her attempts to meet the standards of beauty as dictated by the job and to gain Miranda's approval while also trying to defy Miranda's perception of her. This primacy of femininity also conceives Andy as the type of naïve neophyte of the maturation myths characterize most prominently in the postfeminist heroine that Tasker and Negra observe in the production of the postfeminist imaginary and positions her opposite to Miranda, who represents the prototypical postfeminist villain.

In fact, a revisit of Croft's analysis of *The Devil Wears Prada* reveals the magnitude of the film's reliance on the myth. Croft argues that the film follows the Greek myth Psyche (or what she pins as the origin of the maturation myth) by comparing Andy to the heroine of the myth, Psyche, the innocent woman whose beauty threatens the Goddess, Aphrodite; and Miranda to Aphrodite, who gives Psyche a series of impossible tasks in hope to lead her to a disastrous end in order to ensure that the Goddess's beauty remains unchallenged. She draws a correlation between *The Devil Wears Prada* and the myth in an effort to point out the contentious relationship between Andy and Miranda as the central premise of the film. The contentions for Croft are defined in the ways Miranda merciless requires Andy to fulfill, "the nearly impossible demands" of, and here she quotes from Judith P. Miller's discussion of the film, "professional wifework" (Croft 59). By deeming it professional wifework, both Croft and Miller suggest, even if indirectly, a kind of female-female power relation in Runway that moves away from the typical male-female one. According to Croft, Andy, along with the lead secretary, Emily, is a work-wife responsible to oversee Miranda's daily and personal needs that include everything from fetching coffee, a dog, food, and dry cleaning to getting her car repaired, answering calls, making dinner reservations for her and her husband, to name a few. Moreover, she is subjected to Miranda's whims. In more than one

instance, Miranda demands Andy to perform outrageous errands. For instance, Miranda ordered Andy to find her a flight from Miami to New York during a hurricane. After Andy fails to secure Miranda a flight, Miranda punishes her by requiring Andy to locate an unpublished manuscript of the *Harry Potter* series for her twin daughters and threatening termination if she fails to do so. Andy successfully completes this task; and, as Croft notes, in her comparison of the film to the myth, Andy does the same with most of the tasks Miranda requires her to do. Yet, typical to the narrative of wife-work, as both Croft and Miller point out, Andy does it all without recognition or a show of appreciation with the exception of one caveat: the promise of getting a recommendation that will ensure her a job in journalism within New York's publishing scene.

Despite the shift in the power dynamic typical of the male-female work relationship that is now being acted out in the female-female one from which we see the tensions between Andy and Miranda develop, Croft and Miller outline their contentious relationship within the maturation rites initiation myth as a celebrated example of a mentorship narrative of professional women in American films. According to Croft:

The Devil Wears Prada seems nearly unique in foregrounding a mentoring relationship of the sort that is, if not entirely pleasant for the mentee, at least straightforward about the demands, risks, and rewards involved...the movie echoes, deliberately or not, the essential mythic pattern of the Psyche/Aphrodite story. (Croft 57)

According to this passage, Croft sees the power relation shift in the workplace through notions of coaching and guidance between the expert professional female and the naïve neophyte, which she believes follows the maturation myth. Miller furthers this by comparing Andy and Miranda's interaction to that of Tess and Katharine's, asserting that unlike Katharine, Miranda really attempts to impart in Andy "methods for getting ahead" even if they "are nasty, but...not especially distinct from the conventional account of the backstabbing world of corporate politics." From this Miller concludes that "Miranda's only gendered variation on this corporate world is not feminine but, rather, borderline feminist" (224). Thus, for both Croft and Miller, the contentious relationship between Andy and Miranda is judicious because it is based on the bargain to not only get Andy a job in her desired field, but to mature her for that field as well so that she too may represent the type of female executive that is no longer compromised in America's imagination by her gender.

However, Croft and Miller's reading of the film assumes a type of perceived appreciation Andy has or should have for Miranda despite their contentious relationship and ignores the fact that what they see as a gesture toward mentorship among women is the film's clever shift away from the "realities" women still face in the workplace. What is offered instead is a narrative that advances the story of conflict among women and within the woman. So, even though Miller sees the film as a nod to feminism, noting that "[t]he movie doesn't wear its feminist credentials on its sleeve but sneaks them in sub rosa, subversion by iteration" while Ferriss describes the film as making "the female protagonist more of an agent in her own transformation;" their applause for Miranda's mentorship or Andy's transformation do not really make sense (Millers 225; Ferriss 55). In many respects, they are applauding yet another Hollywood narrative about the development of a woman in corporate American conventionalized in ideas of "personal struggles of individuals" with an emphasis on personal responsibility and not in the context of social relations of gender in the workplace or in the contemporary relationship between labor and capital (Anderson 159). Thus, from their perspective, Andy's conflict in the workplace can be conceived through the notion that she, as Croft explains, "must figure out what is important to her in life and what she is willing to do or sacrifice to get it and take responsibility for choosing her own future" (67). In concert to this, they further assume that her transformation offers a "means of performing identity" that "moves away from the clichéd notion of the industry as oppressing women" (Ferriss 55). In other words, it is not the crisis with work in terms of availability that creates the conflict as Andy notes during her interview with Miranda, "I came to New York to be a journalist and sent letters out everywhere and finally got a call from Elias-Clarke...basically it's this or Auto Universe." Nor is it any of the other issues that women face in workplace as Turk points out above. Rather, it all centers on Andy's inability to fit in to the job or use lean in types of approaches. More directly, it is Andy's ignorance about the job and her reticence to self-regulate to it that constitute the problem. This explains why rather than showing Andy relentlessly submitting applications at magazine companies, the film opens with Andy getting dressed for her interview. In these scenes, the film cuts back and forth between Andy and other women, who are presumable grooming for their work in the fashion industry. Andy is shown naively and negligently spending little time grooming and preparing for work: she chooses casual attire for her interview, wears no make-up with the exception of lip gloss, eats a huge bagel with onion cream cheese seeping from it,

and rides the subway. Her contemporaries, on the other hand, are shown meticulously choosing their underwear, outfits, accessories, and shoes, eating small amounts of granola and nuts, and taking cabs to work. Even though the women in these scenes do not have as much as a minor role in the film, their images and actions demonstrate Andy's level of ignorance and portends the crisis she faces at work as the fault of her own making.

Indeed, Andy's reluctance toward work further grounds the Hollywood narrative in the conflict of the film. For unlike Tess, Andy does not want to change in accordance with an ambition to get ahead in a male dominated field nor does she want to imitate her female boss. In fact, before working at Runway, Andy has no prior knowledge about the fashion industry. She has never heard of the magazine or Miranda Priestly. Moreover, she openly opposes the idea that she needs to change herself to fit in at the job. Repeatedly, she asserts her opposition, particularly in exchanges with Nigel, her pseudo-mentor, who makes offhand comments about her appearance in order to urge her to change. For instance, when he offers her a pair of fashionable heels to wear at work, surmising "I guessed an 8 and a half," she declines his offer and asserts, "I don't need those. Miranda hired me. She knows what I look like." Even though moments later Andy puts on the heels after Miranda glares disapprovingly at her attire; she still resists the idea of changing herself for the job telling Nigel during another exchange they have prompted by his comments on her appearance, weight, and fashion etiquettes: "But you know I'm not going to be in fashion forever- so I don't see the point of changing everything about myself just because I have this job." While much of the exchange between Andy and Nigel is nothing more than banter among colleagues, the essence of it demonstrates the degree to which Andy does not initially possess a desire or interest in working at Runway or in changing herself to keep the job.

In fact, the reason for Andy taking the job in the first place is quickly forgotten and becomes, arguably, nothing more than a narrative device to make sense of her indifference to working at Runway even as she decides to take and keep the job despite her misery. Andy, like many recent college graduates of the millennial, struggles to find work in her field and similar to her friends, she is forced to get "a job that pays the rent" -a chant she and her friends say in unison while dining in '*celebration*' of her desperate decision to accept the position at Runway. However, this scenario loses momentum in the film under the primacy of femininity. Rather than exploring this issue further, the film targets Andy's struggles

in America's working system as the fault of her own doing represented in her ignorance about the prestige of the job and her reticence to adjust, recalibrate, and discipline herself to meet the expectations of it. As an illustration of this, Nigel reprimands Andy after Miranda berates her for failing to secure her travel from Miami. In this largely noted scene Nigel scolds:

Andy, be serious. You are not trying. You are whining. What is it that you want me to say to you, huh? Do you want me to say, "Poor you. Miranda's picking on you. Poor you. Poor Andy"? Hmm? Wake up, six. She's just doing her job. Don't you know that you are working at the place that published some of the greatest artists of the century? Halston, Lagerfeld, de la Renta. And what they did, what they created was greater than art because you live your life in it. Well, not you, obviously, but some people. You think this is just a magazine, hmm? This is not just a magazine. This is a shining beacon of hope [...] You have no idea how many legends have walked these halls. And what's worse, you don't care. Because this place, where so many people would die to work you only deign to work. And you want to know why she doesn't kiss you on the forehead and give you a gold star on your homework at the end of the day. Wake up, sweetheart.

The essence of Nigel's rebuke targets what he sees as Andy's condescension of the industry and her indifferent and somewhat, careless attitude toward the job. In short, the film's account of Andy's plan to work at the job for a year in hopes to get the recommendation she needs to advance her writing career scaffolds a logic that explains away Andy's decision to stay on at the job while concomitantly mobilizing this logic to fashion an internal and personal conflict for Andy through which her struggles at the workplace are relegated principally to the inconsistency she faces in her identity with that of the ideal image of woman in the fashion industry and her indifference to adjusting and discipline herself for the job. Notwithstanding that even in the context of the fictitious space of cinema, such an image has no real place in her aspirations to be a writer. Nevertheless, this strategy allows the film to produce a well-received narrative about a woman "changing everything about herself" to adhere to standards and demands of the job in the hopes to gain her bosses' approval.

In the film, Andy does just that. With the help of Nigel, she transforms everything from her hair, clothing, eating habits, and make-up to "fit" into her job. She also plays into Miranda's cat and mouse game at work, anticipating Miranda's needs before she asks and showing reverence for her name and position. For this, she gets rewarded with more work, with being referenced by her 'real' name instead of being called Second Emily, and with an invite to the coveted trip to Paris for the Fall Fashion Week. At the point when she decides the limits of her transformation, fearing that she will become an imitation of Miranda, who revels, "I see a great deal of myself in you;" she readjusts her moral compass and quits the

job before the one-year mark. The positive feminist slant for critics such as Croft, Miller, and Ferriss is the happy ending scenario in which Miranda gives Andy a superb recommendation to a major New York publishing company. Yet, what goes unnoticed is the circuitous narrative that takes the story back to the crisis that Andy confronted in the first place, the unavailability of work. Somehow, this gets pushed aside for the internal battle that she has with herself and her boss.

Following the template of the Hollywood narrative, Andy does not stay under the power of Miranda. She moves beyond her taking with her a maturity and morality that allow her to surpass Miranda, if not in her career, in her ability to maintain an identity of femininity that makes her advancement in her career both anticipated and acceptable. Strangely enough, this is validated in Andy's reconciliation with her live-in boyfriend, Nate, with whom she breaks up with during her transformation. Before going to a job interview with the major publication company, she meets him for lunch and confesses her transgressions to him at which time, despite his decision to move to Boston to work as a sous-chef he affirms to her that they could make something work out. In short, Andy regains her place as a working woman who still remains desirable. This is juxtaposed to Miranda, who, on the other hand, has not maintain such an identity, even though she embodies the femaleness that Jack Trainer ranted to Tess. She is, in fact, unable to maintain a connubial desirability and by the end of the film, she confesses to Andy that she is getting yet another divorce.

Yet, despite this, Miranda still constitutes the fixed center for Andy and the point from which all issues with working women in the film are centered. She sets the standards by which Andy must adjust, and invokes in Andy what Sheryl Sandberg, in her book, *Lean In*, states about the internal revolution of women in the workplace. Miranda represents Sandberg's ideas that sexual inequality in corporate America should be consider more than the institutional and systemic forms of discrimination; but rather to focus in some ways singularly on the "internal barriers," of which she believes "deserve a lot more attention, in part because they are under our own control" (8).

Conclusion

To recapitulate, this chapter seeks to interrogate, through the lens of self-regulation, representations of "the personal" approach to questions of working women and gender equality that are staged in fictions about work. If we recall Goodman's observation for a moment, we are reminded that this

approach takes the shape of femininity in the context of the late stage of capitalism and that it uses it to urge women to reproduce themselves in the image of the corporation. Indeed, the protagonists in *Working Girls* and *The Devil Wears Prada* do just that: Tess and Andy consciously and autogenously adjust, recalibrate, and discipline themselves to the demands of their job. And in doing so, they are granted the image of the heroine, whose tenacity and vitality guaranteed their upward mobility whereby each was awarded the jobs of their dreams: Tess, the managerial perch and Andy, the position of writer in New York publishing scene.

By designating gender and questions of equality personal matters and contested sites of femininity wherefrom both the issues that are thought to define and the solutions that are imagined to resolve America's work crisis are entertained, these films are able to further advance the Hollywood narrative of working women, which since the 1980s, as Anderson and Traube inform, has aggressively coupled the idea of "ambition women as a cause of moral crisis" with the notion that upward mobility for women is a matter of "success or failure in individual terms." This narrative also continues to dramatize this coupling through concepts of women empowerment premised in their ability to maintain a form of femaleness/sexuality- one that makes their upward mobility palatable. While this, to some degree, finds home in postfeminist camps and the white collar feminist response to experiences of women in America's work system, it also symbolizes the ways the films limit the crisis of work and questions of gender equality to the matter of a personal struggle for the individual woman. To this end, the ways stories are told about working women will continue to constitute a tale about a struggle among women and within the woman.

CHAPTER 4: WHITE MAN'S BURDEN, BLACK MAN'S BLAME: *MIDDLESEX*, SELF-REGULATION, AND RACE

Nevertheless, at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation (30)

-Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*

[T]he fault dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings [...] clearly who is to blame for slums—the slum dwellers themselves and those stupid citizens who deny them a civilized birth-control program. As long as human beings continue to breed like animal, they will live like animals.

-Thomas H. McKee of Dallas, August 5, 1967

What about the Matter of Race Revisited

In this chapter, I extend my discussion on the ideology of self-regulation and the question of race that I raised briefly in chapter two of this dissertation. As part of a larger project, I explored, in that chapter, the paradox of self-regulation that became apparent to me in my reading of Barbara Ehrenreich's book, *Nickel and Dimed*, concerning her experiences with and assessment and conclusion about low wage living. Through my reading, I saw that as much as the ideology of self-regulation, being a special feature of responsibility of the Post-Fordist era, calls for individuals to autogenously adjust, recalibrate, and discipline to the logic of capitalism; when considered alongside race, I observed that it also requires that such self-governing acts be dependent on the dominant culture for its matrix. My intent was to show how self-regulation goes easily unrecognized in American society concerning work for ideas such as self-reflections, considerations, and other things said to stem from and motivate the inner recesses of the mind. Race, I argued, drawing upon Manning Marable's observations about it in conjunction with dependency in his book, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* exposes a fissure in this ideology. It reveals that self-regulation works to obfuscate the external forces and mandates by which the individual is beholden. Race allowed me to see the ways that rhetoric and ideology of self-regulation in American culture holds individuals (usually in comparison to black stereotypes) personally responsible for their conditions in the United States, works to mystify the forces that produce those very condition, and requires that the individuals be dependent on those same forces. The result is that the individual becomes the site of both the problem and solution to the conditions s/he faces. Needless to say, there were limits I experienced in thinking about race in *Nickel and Dimed*. Race, in this book, remains largely in the periphery; and thus, appears finite and permanent in ways that critical race scholars warn against.

This is largely because the emphasis on class in *Nickel and Dimed* takes on the types of racially neutral stances that are typical in traditional class analysis.

Self-regulation and White Anxiety

So, to think about it further, I turn briefly to David Roediger's reference to dependency in his theorization of racial paradigms in formations of the white working class in the period of the first sixty-five years of the 19th century of United States history in his book, *The Wages of Whiteness*. Approaching race as reflexive of U.S. historical specificities, Roediger makes a rather convincing argument about the ways it "has at all times been a critical factor in the history of US class formation" (11). He delivers his claims through an analysis of source materials in slavery studies with a critique of language, song, and folklore among other things to demonstrate that the formation of the white working class in the U.S. developed in conjunction with the white worker's sense of whiteness. He asserts that the white worker's sense of whiteness was not a natural or "wholly ideological" condition of US history. Rather, he contends, in the broader context of his book that "whiteness was a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline" (13). He further surmises that in responding this to fear the white working class "began during its formation to construct an image of the Black population as 'other'- as embodying the preindustrial, erotic, careless style of life the white worker hated and longed for" (14). What he seems to be explaining here is a kind of white anxiety that seeks the consolidation of white identity in a language of othering premised in ideas of independency. Additionally, he appears to be asserting, by extension, that whiteness represents a type of self-making narrative used to generate an account of an ability to obtain dominance unaided by which white workers could deal with the fear of dependency on conditions produced within labor and capital relations linguistically contained in the antonyms of dependency: autonomy, individualism, independency, sovereignty, domination, etc. In short, Roediger points out the incongruity between the reality of white workers being, as they were, dependent on wages and on the regimen of capitalism and a language that would come to be cloaked within self-making narratives constructed in the images of the black population as exemplar of the dependencies the white working class disdained (14). He tells us that the intent of this was to secure an identity synonymous with their conception of independency represented as "white" and "male."

Once again, I am confronted by the correlation between race and dependency that portends a language that would later come to conceptualize the working world in the U.S. even if appearing outside racial paradigms. When considering Roediger's argument alongside my conjectures about the ways race reveals a contradiction in self-regulation in the form of dependency regarding its call for one to autogenously adjust, recalibrate, and discipline and its requirement that such self-governing acts be contingent on the dominant culture for its matrix; it reveals that the ideas of self-regulation that appear natural, racially neutral, and/or universal are also conceivably a reactionary response to white anxiety about dependency on wages and capitalist work disciplines. This may help to explain why Roediger sees that, "white identity has its roots both in domination and in a desire to avoid confronting one's own miseries" (186). Equally important, he seems to suggest more broadly that to study constructions of white identity some consideration of the presence of images of the black population must be measured. For, as he informs, the national narrative of freedom and liberty under capitalism coalesces with a history of America's labor structures and labor force coded in notions of free versus paid labor, slave versus wage labor, and dependency versus independency of which the black population stand as a recalcitrant character. What all this appears to add to my inquiry about race and self-regulation is that the construction of whiteness premised in what it is and what it is not according to perceptions of black identity gets conceptualized as the site for the problem of and the solution to conditions of labor and capital relations through the regulation of white identity that takes the form of self-making narratives.²⁹

Middlesex and White (Male) Anxiety

The objective in this chapter is to see how this takes shape in American literature. For this reason, I direct my attention to Jeffrey Eugenides' novel, *Middlesex* (2002) as an example of a text in the

²⁹ This, of course, could suggest that the self-regulatory paradigm of the Post-Fordist era shows up in other moments in U.S. labor history. While on some levels this is true, I can't ignore that the source materials for Roediger's argument make identifying the incongruity more easily accessible; especially, when considering that conveyances of race and racism of that time were far beyond diffidence. However, in the period Post WWII period, language of self-regulation has steadily crept into political and cultural signifiers of economic and social conditions without a definitive reference to race. With the retooling of work in America, self-regulation has become even more coded in systematic developments of identity formations. The ways it constitutes race and gender in American cultural sentiments about work, then becomes almost indiscernible. Therefore, the task of this dissertation in exploring it in this late stage of capital production has been to make it more observable within American culture.

genres of American working-class and immigrant literatures that assumes the rhetoric of whiteness and follows the conventions of self-making narratives in American literary culture in ways that are not too dissimilar to the ideas of formations of whiteness that Roediger points to in his discussion about white working-class formations. This rhetoric, according to Roediger, works to generate self-making narratives to deal with white anxieties of dependencies on wages and capitalists work disciplines and it does this through the use of a black presence. In my analysis of the novel, I read for the ways this frames the conflict of immigration and intersexuality for the protagonist, Cal Stephanides, a third-generation Greek American hermaphrodite, who through a narration about the Stephanides' history and his intersexuality, tries to consolidate for himself a white male heterosexual identity. My intent is to think about this self-making narrative, as a response to white anxiety that seeks reassurance in what white identity is and what it is not constituted in the language that relies on a black presence to articulate a white identity independent from the larger social determinants. In particular, I read the self-making imperative of this novel as a site of self-regulation that evinces the adjustment, recalibration, and discipline of white identity.

White anxiety, I contend, shows up in the inconsistency of the narration of the novel given that *Middlesex* offers a complicated narration of Cal (or in reference to his female self, Cali/Calliope) Stephanides, who identifies himself as a forty-one year old white American heterosexual male living in Germany as a diplomat and recounts a story about his immigrant Greek family's struggle to assimilate into American culture and his own personal struggles growing up intersexed. Even though much of his narrative recounts his experiences growing up in Detroit and its suburb and his complicated development into adulthood within the in-between and middle spaces of sexual and gender binaries as a condition of a 5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites mutation that caused him to be born female and later, at the age of fourteen transform into male, it concludes rather easily and neatly affirming the very identity that Cal uses to introduce himself (white heterosexual American male) at the beginning of his narrative. This closure is unsettling for some critics, who see the novel as an aesthetic failure. They argue that the novel fails to fulfill what it seems to promise in challenging sexual and gender binaries. However, I read it for the ways this "aesthetic failure" really is the novel's exercise in negotiating white anxiety in the conventional sense of responding to the reality of their dependency on wages and the disciplines of capitalism by way of a self-making narrative and specific to the current stage of capitalism, the dismantling of job security,

the decrease in median income, de-industrialism, and the weakening of labor organizing power that white (male) Americans along with the majority of Americans at even more significant levels currently face. Thus, the literary moves Eugenides makes to easily and neatly secure his protagonist a heterosexual white male identity at the closing of the novel involves a reading of it in the frame of self-regulation. The bypassing of the complicated narrative of an intersexed individual trying to find a space in the middle beyond the restraints of sexual and gender binaries only to end up embodying the quintessential identity of a white heterosexual American male bears the markings of the types of adjusting, recalibrating and disciplining that come with the self-regulation of white (male) identity. This may explain why Patricia Chu along with other critics read *Middlesex* as an exercise in the revival of “the tired genre” of the “white ethnic immigrant narrative” in reference to the types of narratives plotted in evaluating and comparing a given European ethnic groups’ successful assimilation into mainstream (white) American culture and norms fraught with tragically idyllic scenarios of overcoming, self-determination, self-perseverance, and endurance (Patricia E. Chu 281). Or why Chu asks in her essay, ““(NA) Coding the Ethnic: Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*,” “Is the ‘alias of his [Cali’s] new gender’ also an alias for Eugenides, a way to revive the immigrant dream of (white) self-making” (282).

With Chu’s question in mind, I offer up in my reading of the novel white anxiety as a site of focus for the construction of white identity premised on the reassurance of what it is and what it is not with respect to the ways it also demonstrates a form of self-regulation to a dominant ideology of race and class (guised as itself). I argue that by reading the novel this way, the mystification of self-regulation that has been so difficult to unveil in the course of this project becomes remarkably easier to uncover. For, if white identity is the standard of society and the markings of a dominant culture, then to regulate to it as a member of it means to self-regulate unto oneself. Without looking at the global political economic forces that invoke such modulations, then the call to self-regulate is really nothing more than an internal process of policing (i.e. adjusting, recalibrating, and disciplining) oneself for intrapersonal reasons. Hence, the language to understand the mandates to adjust, recalibrate, and discipline oneself is empty of history and bears no relation with that from which it emerged. In this chapter, I analyze *Middlesex* by examining Eugenides’s use of the conventions of self-making narratives as they mobilize self-regulation within the intersections of constructions of white identity premise on what it is and what it is not rooted in language

of othering. Self-regulation, in this novel, as I shall argue takes the form of the self-making narrative that seeks the adjustment, recalibration, and discipline of white (male) identity restricted to the logic of capitalism (even as it is presented as an internal process of policing oneself for intrapersonal reasons) from which the problem and solution to work crises in America take the shape of regulating that identity.

For this reason, I am particularly interested in analyzing Eugenides's use of the conventions of the self-making narrative that include the black presence as a maker for what white identity is and is not. To do so, I contextualize my analysis in David Wellman's discussion of constructions of white identities within the linguistic performance of minstrelsy and do a close reading of it through Toni Morrison's theory of African Americanism to discuss their critique of "whiteness" in American literary and cultural productions. Specifically, I focus my examination on the chapter, "Opa!," where Eugenides writes the 1967 Detroit riots as a monograph for Cal's self-making narrative. In fact, I spend a considerable amount of time there to consider how the writing of the riots permit Eugenides to elasticized through the self-regulation of whiteness and masculinity his main character's intersexuality to consolidate for him an identity distinctly white, heterosexual, and male.

Blame it on the Blacks: Retracing the Contradiction of Self-Regulation and Race

It is important to understand this white anxiety and the self-making narratives premised in concepts of dependency as they are in the latter half of the twentieth century. To do so, I trace them back to the Moynihan report on *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. This report is quite important to the questions at hand, especially when considering that Daniel P. Moynihan, an American sociologist and assistant Secretary to Labor under President Johnson, portends the self-regulation ideology and rhetoric of the Post-Fordist era of production and of the ensuing crisis of the middle working class (in the diminishment in mass industrial production and consumerism and the organizations of workers, etc.) that look to the individual as the site of both the problem and solution to the work crisis. More importantly, he relies on the types of self-making strategies of writing whiteness against pejorative images of the black population of which Roediger informs.³⁰ The purpose of the report was to interrogate the cause for the exponential growth in welfare rolls in the early 1960s. From this interrogation, he concludes that the cultural deviancy of black people represented in the disorganization of the black family (and defined in

³⁰ For a specific history of the Post-Fordist era and study see Amin, Ash. *Post-Fordism: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1994. Print.

terms of the high rates of female head of households, divorce, separation, desertion by the black male, and illegitimacy) is to blame for many of the factors that led to the increase in need for public assistance (including unemployment, under-employment, high poverty rates, imprisonments, and social dependency). Even though, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward inform that the causes for the exponential increase in welfare rolls were much more complex than *the black family*, attributing it to several factors including the collapse in welfare restrictions that impeded blacks from receiving benefits in the past and the increase in civil unrests; and despite his own acknowledgement about how, “[t]hree centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American,” Moynihan still concludes that the cause for the increase in welfare rolls is the disorganized black family.³¹ He describes it as a “tangle of pathology” that “is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world” (47). The degree to which he holds to this assumption is evident in the epigraph above:

“Nevertheless, at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation” (30).

In sum, he relegates the impact of centuries of racial violence and discrimination against black people by white patriarchal structures in the United States to a development of a pathology that produces in the black individual an internal tendency toward deviancy and that makes (s)he incapable of functioning productively in society. Although, he hints at this not being a product of their own making in the phrase “that did not establish,” he uses language that signals an internal defect in the black individual (i.e. aberrant, inadequate, and antisocial). By doing this, he turns a long history of violence against the black population in the U.S. into a singular and personal matter for an individual person (and/or group); thereby,

³¹ Of note, some contemporary studies of the Moynihan report such as the one done by Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward in the book, *Regulating the Poor*, contest the claim that the disorganization of the black family is to blame for the rise in welfare rolls. They base this claim on several things they believe that Moynihan overlooked or ignored, including that coinciding with the post-World War II migration of black people to the North metropolitan centers was the collapse in the restrictions that qualified more black people to receive public assistance who otherwise had been, since the Great Depression, disproportionately impeded from receiving it and that the collapse of restrictions was a reaction to the “political civil” unrest that developed in response to the rapid changes in the U.S. economy that left a large portion of the low wage working sector in American society vulnerable (197).

relieving white society of any burden of such productions. He does this by not only making it personal; but by de-historicizing it, making it a thing of an abstract past that no longer has any real bearings on the conditions of black Americans. From this, he is, then, able to hold the “white world” up as an example for black Americans as if to say, “Yes, the white world is the cause for the conditions you are in and continues to be so; however, it is the example by which you should choose to live your life. Your failure to emulate it, to modulate to its lifestyle, beliefs, and values is the source of your problem and not only your problem, but a problem that affects the entire nation.” To support his assertions, he references sociological studies, statistics, data about the Negro family, the demographics on the number of households with father’s present, income, and unemployment rates. Ironically, this information also shows that white people were impacted by the economic shifts in America and by the issue with low wages of that time. How this information correlates to the increase in welfare rolls remains outside the scope of his inquiry. Instead, he uses this information to highlight the disparities between the black individual (as measured in the unit of the family) and the white world:

But there is one truly great discontinuity in family structure in the United States at the present time: that between the white world in general and that of the Negro American. The white family has achieved a high degree of stability and is maintaining that stability. By contrast, the family of the lower class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown. (5)

The phrase “in general” in this passage refers to the notion of being typical or representing “the whole” as an example of people who are “achieving a higher degree of stability” and possessing the ability to maintain this high achievement. Through this phrasing, he establishes a rhetoric that dichotomizes black and white Americans within racial hierarchies. This dichotomy in American culture still has traction to this day.

To push it even further, he calls for a national action to address the pathology of the black family. Despite admitting the continuous uneven job market for blacks since the WWII or wage rates that could not, at the time of the report and remains so even to this day, sustain an individual let alone a family; he calls for a national action that would require black people to discipline and recalibration their family structure to (white) societal norms (a national call that would also resurface in the welfare reform act of 1996): “The object should be to strengthen the Negro family so as to enable it to raise and support its members as do other families. After that, how this group of Americans chooses to run its affairs, take

advantage of its opportunities, or fail to do so, is none of the nation's business" (47-8).³² Essentially, Moynihan posits that the issue with black Americans securing employment in the U.S. is nothing more than a crisis of morals and that this crisis calls for national attention, both in terms of developing ways to morally instruct black Americans and to require that they function more self-sufficiently. The root claim of this national call to action as well as the overall report reveals a proliferation of anxiety in American culture about the larger socio-historical and economic conditions that are believed to be mediated, as Roediger tells us, by morality and personal responsibility. It is with the use of race that Moynihan attempts to validate this belief. It is as if Toni Morrison's observations about the use of an African Americanist presence in the literary imagination included this report; especially considering that, according to Morrison, the African Americanist presence "makes possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and to act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and *a mechanism for testing the problems* and blessings of freedom (emphasis added *Playing in the Dark*, 7). Moynihan's choice to push aside the long history of racial violence in the United States, the continuous uneven employment availability and wage disparities for black Americans, or the other implications that led to an increase in welfare rolls including the collapse of welfare restrictions and the increase in civil unrest of the 1960s in order to focus on what he sees as black people's (as measured in the unit of the family) inability to regulate to the social norms of American (white) society, most certainly points to an implementation of an African Americanist presence and to an unsettled fissure in the self-regulatory imperative of the current social relation of capitalism. It also allows him to base his initial assessment of the pathology of the black family on the notion that white people, as a whole, have achieved a cultural efficiency that is exemplar in American society. Through this, he constructs an identity of white people in accordance with the idea that they represent the standard and the expected norm, while also vaunting their exceptionalism. Through this

³² In the subsection on "Wages," Moynihan admits that the wages at the time of his report were not sufficient to sustain the life of a family. In fact, he admits, "The Federal minimum wage of \$1.25 per hour provides a basic income for an individual, but an income well below the poverty line or a couple much less a family with children" (24). In another place, he acknowledges that the Negroes' unemployment rates after WWII have remained in staggeringly higher numbers than whites. He writes, "The fundamental, overwhelming fact is that Negro unemployment, with the exception of a few years during World War II and the Korean War, has continued at disaster levels for 35 years" and that "[b]y 1940, the 2 to 1 white-Negro unemployment relationship that persists to this day had clearly emerged (20).

construction of their identity premised in what they are and what they are not, he calls for a course of action that places the burden on the (white) nation to morally instruct black people and the blame on individual black people, measured in the unit of family, for the perpetuation of their own pathology and thus, their life of poverty.

White Anxiety and the Black Presence

Up to this point in the chapter, I have discussed Roediger's book and Moynihan's report to explore the ways white (male) anxiety proliferates in American cultural and political imaginaries and intersects with the rhetoric and ideology of self-regulation as a response to larger social and economic conditions for the purpose of setting up a framework through which to read *Middlesex*. Both, albeit from vastly different viewpoints, describe a kind of consolidation of white identity premised in what it is and what it is not in contrast to the black population. This contrast that works within the consolidation of white identity relies on a black presence of which Roediger critiques and Moynihan generates.

It is this black presence that most concerns me here; particularly in the ways that it functions as a signpost in Roediger and Moynihan's articulations about self-making narratives, although for different reasons. To address this concern, I turn briefly to David Wellman and Toni Morrison's discussion of the black presence that intersects conversations of white formations in whiteness studies. As I have state elsewhere, I am of the position that the construction of whiteness is a response to white anxieties that seek a redress in the self-regulation of white identity through self-making narratives that mobilizes tales based on what white identity is and what it is not in relation to the image of the black population. White identity becomes the site of anxiety and thus, the source of the problem and solution. It is that which has to be regulated. Some measure of this can be seen in David Wellman's essay, "Affirmative Action and Angry White Men: Marking Racial Otherness in 1990." In this essay, he gives a context to the production of whiteness that employs images of the black population to address white anxieties. He asserts that in contemporary politics and culture "elements of the black life" are employed "to negotiate problems posed by the larger society" in ways that are not to dissimilar to the practice of blackface of minstrelsy. He makes his claims in the framework of whiteness studies that emerge in the literary scene most prominently in 1980s forward and that saw to the charge to critique whiteness and masculinity as racial and gender categories. Using this framework, he details the means by which "the privileges that came

with whiteness and masculinity” as categories that “were experienced as ‘normal’,” were put into crisis and the subsequent, exploitation of racially charged language that was used to recoup an identity outside these categories. He lists “fiscal mismanagement, job flight, increase in economic inequality and political gridlock” as the site of white anxiety wherefrom white working men along with the majority of Americans were ‘losing ground’ in the current global and political economy (319). He lists the visibility of whiteness and masculinity as categories of identities as another factor (321). Using an analogy of minstrelsy, he references the performances of black face in an earlier period in American history to point out how, through the construction of white identity and the reassurance of what it is and is not, white (male) Americans attempt to contend with their anxieties. He argues, citing historian, Thomas Holt, that their response to this anxiety is a performance of black face in the form of language through which they attempt to act out linguistically the stereotypes of black people purposed in holding them in contempt for the crisis white people in America face. He argues that in the post 1980s years, affirmative action has set the scene for this performance. He describes it this way:

Like the minstrel shows of an earlier era, anti-affirmative action talk is not just about race, even though the apparent objects of ridicule and derision are mostly African Americans. And also like minstrelsy, the talk is not based on facts or the actual lived experience of black Americans. Like their counterparts in the previous century, the “scholarship” of affirmative action’s major intellectual critics...is not “scholarly” in any serious sense of the term. The data they use are outdated and flimsy. Assertion substitutes for argumentations; anecdotes pretend to be systematic evidence; mystification masquerades as social science; and fantasy is treated as truth. It is a remarkable performance. (313)

Here, Wellman informs that affirmative action triggers a backlash against legislative attempts to promote fairness in America’s public sectors. Most interestingly, he reads this in the frame of anti-affirmative action talks that function as a type of performance, which works to resuscitate the entertainment factor within American culture around a staging of false narratives of the black other. He asserts that typical to these talks are linguistic routines and theatrics against affirmative action that allow white (male) Americans to depict themselves as “highly achieved” and possessing forms of “perseverance, toughness, independence and self-help” and to typecast black people as “a dependent, undeserving, unqualified, ungrateful, and immoral trespasser” (318 and 325 respectively). Placing it in the context of affirmation action, Wellman shows how this construction of whiteness claims an identity wholly separate from

preferential treatment, receiverships, and other nomenclatures of dependencies. For instance, in the following passage he illustrates this performance:

Instead of applying greasepaint, the performers in this minstrel show hide behind clever linguistic constructions. Rather than speaking in dialect, they talk the language of “fairness,” color-blindness,” and “meritocracy.” While the content has changed, this modern minstrel show provides another stage of constructing and expressing white (especially heterosexual male) identity. And like its earlier incarnation, the new minstrelsy assures white men who they are not: not unqualified recipients of unfair advantage, not responsible for past racial injustices, not beneficiaries of government assistance. (313)

In this passage, he details how anti-affirmative action talks demonstrate one of the most elaborate display of linguistic performance geared at constituting, within this current stage in history, the tropes of white supremacy and black inferiority that are used to linguistically route paths of escape for white (male) Americans from their fear of dependency on the same things Roediger pointed out: wages and capitalist work disciplines, albeit in a global political economic context. Most significantly, he does this by characterizing the performance in the language of personal responsibility specific to the typical mandates of contemporary capitalism that, as I have pointed out elsewhere, alleviate the state and capital from social responsibility. The obviousness of Wellman’s claims here is that the conventions of constructions of white identities remain invested in the project of othering black Americans.

Morrison adds to the conversation by theorizing the writing of the black presence in American literature and national narrative in her book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Looking at canonical American literature, her discussion covers the ways writers respond to a black presence in their fictional works through a practice she terms “African Americanism,” which she uses to describe “the connotative and denotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people” (6-7). She argues that the black presence within American literature, despite its prominence in the way stories discuss or police “matters of class, sexual license, and representations, formations and exercises of power, and mediations on ethics and accountability,” somehow continues to remain marginal in understandings about American literature and national narratives (7). For Morrison, this is most troubling considering that rather “coded or explicit, indirect or overt, the linguistic responses to an Africanist presence complicate texts, sometimes contradicting them entirely” (66). She goes on to explain that “[a] writer’s response to American Africanism often provides a subtext that either sabotages

the surface text's expressed intentions or escapes from through a language that mystifies what it cannot bring itself to articulate but still attempt to registers" (66). According to Morrison, recognition of it could help offer new interpretations, understandings, and meanings to the disconnections, gaps, and/or leaps made by writers, whose response to the black presence tend to be invisible within traditional critical scholarship. For Morrison, the black presence represents more than a palimpsest; it is an active signifier that gives writers access to various literary devices to generate stories about the human experience. Morrison describes in the following passage, the failure to recognize the black presence in literature. According Morrison argues:

Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate. The situation is aggravated by the tremor that breaks into discourse on race. It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. (9-10)

Essentially, Morrison alerts us, in this passage, to the omission of recognition of the black presence in literature. The result, she further informs, is an existence in the literature as a dark figure whose presence is faint. This type of existence, she contends, bars the possibility for discussions on race.

In addition, she makes, albeit indirectly, an observation, which correlates the operational element of the black presence or African Americanism or Africanism, as she terms it, to self-regulation. The act of discussing, policing and yet, ignoring, which I have described elsewhere in the dissertation, is one of regulating. It is an active approach to controlling, adjusting, disciplining the story to pursue a desired invention. What is even more striking is that she sees this through the lens of the self-making paradigm that Roediger gestured and Wellman explicated: "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (52). In effect, the black presence, according Morrison, allows writers to adopt a language through which to write the self. Hence, it does not seem too far-reaching to conclude that the black presence is a tool of self-regulation. It is the object used to invoke an internal adjustment, recalibration, and discipline of the self. In other words, as detailed in this passage and in numerous moments throughout this chapter, it gives a language to construct what a (white) American identity is and what it is not.

We Almost Lost Detroit: Writing the 1967 Detroit Riot

Eugenides's writing of the Detroit riots of 1967 gives such an example. In the chapter titled, "Opal," Eugenides writes about the events surrounding the race riots beginning the early morning hours of July 23rd. He recalls that while the Detroit police were performing their routine raid on the blind pig, they were met with a barrage of resistance from black people. Eugenides' encloses his historical account of this moment in Cal's narrative about his first trip with Julie Kikuchi, the Asian-American woman who is penned as the object of interest Eugenides conjures for Cal in the pursuit to secure his protagonist a white American male identity. It is also framed in the protagonist's recollection of the "hungry" years of his early life when his family's restaurant, the Zebra Room, starts to go under as the neighborhood becomes primarily occupied by black Americans. The oddity of this narration is that Eugenides writes Cal writing as a forty-one years old white male, remembering the events from the perspective of a preadolescent girl named Calliope (or Cali), who is not aware of possessing 5-Alpha Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites mutation that would result in her, within a few years, developing into a boy. In this chapter, I examine the oddity of the narration's structure, coupled with the black presence (which I discussed above), to demonstrate how self-regulation functions in the novel to configure a crisis in terms of Cal's anxiety about his white male heterosexual identity and how it necessitates an adjustment, recalibration, and discipline of it premised on what it is and what it is not in relation to images of black people.

The Detroit that Eugenides writes Cal recalling goes back to the 1920s during which time there was massive development in Downtown Detroit that saw to the erection of such building as the Penobscot Building, Cadillac Tower, and the Fisher Building as well as to the massive homeless of the construction workers building these edifices due to housing shortages (88). He also recalls a Detroit of the 1930s as the birthplace of the Nation of Islam, where his grandmother, Desdemona, would work at Temple No. 1 training black girls to weave silk and where his maternal grandfather, the "prophet" Wallace Fard Mohammad known to Lefty, Desdemona, and Sourmelina as Jimmy Zizmo, was the founder. He also describes a segregated Detroit during these decades when most of Detroit's black population was cornered into the ghetto called Black Bottom. And perhaps, the most significant, he recollects the Detroit of the 1967 riots that would forever change the socio-cultural dynamic of Detroit and that caused an end to the Stephanides' Zebra Room restaurant (and in many ways Cal's connection with Detroit besides the

typical passing through it to get to the suburb or the occasional nostalgia tour). To his story of sexual transformation, it makes sense that the story does not move much beyond the riots.

Eugenides' writing of the 1967 riots recapitulates the commonly told story about it. As the story goes, the event began in the early hours on July 23rd. Black people were partying at the blind pig and cops came to do their usual raid. This particular morning, the riot erupted. Eugenides does not hint at the definitive cause for the eruption, other than offering up latent frustration as a potential reason: "[T]he way the air has somehow been keeping score, and how at this moment in July of 1967 the tally of abuses has reached a point so that the imperative flies out from Watts and Newark to Twelfth Street in Detroit" (237). However, he uses specific details to list the numbers of death, injuries, stores looted, and fires. He also recounts the name of the two white victims in the riots. He sums up the hours of interactions between Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh and Governor George Romney. He even conjures up the name Cyrus Vance, the United States Deputy Secretary of Defense to generate the scene of the riot structured in verifiable facts as typical of historical fiction. His concept of the Detroit riots follows the narrative that never quite grasped the reasons for the civil unrest; it follows the typical narrative of the riots. Plainly put, he writes a (white) sanitized version of the Detroit riots to set the scene for Cal's narrative.

Cal's narrative begins with him sharing his trepidations about allowing Julie to see him nude and the anxieties he recalls his father experiencing when the family restaurant business was failing. First, he details his grooming and dressing routine and then, lists the masculine and fashionable clothing he wears to meet up with Julie. Next, he shares their experience seeing naturalists on the beach, and describes his "masculine" physic in comparison to the men who are nude: "I mean, my body is so much better than theirs. I'm the one with the well-defined biceps, the bulging pectorals, the burnished glutes" (233). He encloses all of this information with the sentence, "But I could never saunter around in public like that" (233). Cal expresses, in this section, the anxiety he is experiencing with the thought of his body being exposed. Despite his clothes and fit physique, he feels anxious about his masculinity. However, he ends this scene on a note of hope. He recalls the feeling of possibility when standing next to Julie on an island in Germany as a heterosexual man.

Why Cal chooses this moment in history to pinpoint the experience he had in Germany is not clear. However, what is apparent is the black presence that is used in the chapter to create a foundation

to secure a narrative of white assimilation and upward mobility- one in which he can use to overcome his anxieties and secure an identity as a white heterosexual male. What I mean is beside the more obvious moment in this chapter when the Zebra Room is destroyed in the riot and Milton receives payouts from the insurance for the restaurant, - a moment that is referenced by many critics for providing the Stephanides a way out of poverty, - the details that are used to describe the actors and events of the riots secure this foundation as well. There are three specific moments in "Opa!" I explore to investigate the black presence and the construction of this foundation. The first, and most obvious, is the not so nuanced ways the black presence persists in this chapter. For instance, when Cal recalls the events that transpired during the riot, he uses the following description:

Key-lime Cadillacs, fire-red Toronados, wide-mouthed, trolling Lincolns, all in perfect shape. Chrome glints, Hubcaps shine. Not a single rust spot anywhere. (Which is something that always amazes Milton about black people, the contradiction between the perfection of their automobiles and the disrepair of their houses). (236)

And in the conventional approach of singling out a black presence, Eugenides's writes Cal employing the negro dialect: "Get yo' hands offa them, motherfucking pigs!" (237). The irony of this moment is, of course, that there is no way he could have been present at the time of the event. He was a seven years old girl living on the eastside of Detroit. While I will not press the issue of dialect or compare it to that of his immigrant parents, whose dialect is written according to the standard English by which Cal communicates, I will point to the absurdity of this moment in the novel in a simply question: How could a seven years old girl know the specifics of the Detroit riot to recount distinguishing characteristics of black actors at the start of it? The credibility of the historical accounts in the novel is not in question, here. Clearly, the inconsistency of the narrative shifts that move from first to third person throughout the novel indicates this as such. Yet, if we recall, that in just a few pages earlier in the novel, Cal details picking up Julie in an "rented Mercedes, an unquiet diesel" and wearing "the camel-hair turtleneck, tweed blazer, and jeans" along with "a pair of handmade cordovans by Edward Green," we are beset with an image that positions him in opposition to the black presence even if it is decades in distance of time and space away (232). The images of gaudy colors, poor judgment (house versus automobile), and negro dialect all point to the types of negative images Roediger, Wellman, and Morrison describe and moral deficiency that Moynihan conjures in relations to the construction of white identity.

In the second moment, Cal recounts the images of black prostitutes who are standing “at the curb as cars cruise by” (236). He gives a description of their clothing and their behavior while working the streets. He details their smells and the things they feel: “[T]he girls working it, laughing, high enough by 5 a.m. to be numb to the rawness between their legs and the residues of men no amount of perfume can get rid of...each of those young women smells in places that count like a very ripe, soft French cheese” (237). Again, how he has access to such graphic details is not clear. Yet, he descends into the black and blue, even farther than invisible man, - but without Louis Armstrong or marijuana- and remembers the prostitutes’ inner thoughts, ambitions, and lack of a sense of responsibility:

They’re numb, too, to thoughts of babies left at home, six-month-old with bad colds lying in used cribs, sucking on pacifiers, and having a hard time breathing...numb to the lingering taste of semen in their mouths along with peppermint gum, most of these girls no more than eighteen, this curb on Twelfth Street their first real place of employment, the most the country has to offer in the way of a vocation. Where are they going to go from here? They’re numb to that, too, except for a couple who have dreams of singing backup or opening up a hair shop...But this is all part of what happened that night. (237)

From the magnitude of Cal’s insight, it is apparent that the scope of his remembering has descended beyond any human capability. Even the instances in his story when he recounts Desdemona, his grandmother’s thoughts, the permissibility of such access comes from genetics or possibly from the telling of secrets. So, then, how are we to understand this moment? To pose this another way, what is his source material for conjuring within the black and blue this narrative for the prostitutes?

Given the details he recounts about the riot and considering the rationale of remembering employed in the novel, the source materials could be a composite of what he remembers and what he remembers being told. Yet, if we, again, consider the black presence, here, then the entry he gains into the prostitutes’ minds demonstrates a form cultural knowledge, by which one can access information about another (or the other) from random notions, assumptions, and beliefs. Considering Morrison’s claims about the black presence, perhaps this moment will make more sense. She calls them the “taken-for-granted assumptions that lie in their usage” by which they employ “the pervasive use of black images and people in expressive prose” (x). Morrison’s suggestions offer a possibility for this to be one of the taken-for-granted assumptions that she sees occurring in American literature. If this is true, then perhaps the source material may not be as important as the function of what his remembers. The story is told from the perspective of a man, who, at seven years old, was a girl. He, like, the prostitutes does not have a

clue about what would soon await him. Seven years from this moment in history, he would be on a journey to discover an identity after finding out that he also possesses the sexual organs of a male. However, unlike the black prostitutes' foretold journeys that he shares, which whether it is the case of class, race, gender, or a combination of all, will end in tragedy or immobility; he has a future that is not determined by any of those factors. He ascends into an upper middle-class position with employment at the U.S. State Department as a diplomat in Germany. Despite his Greek immigrant family ethnicity, he achieves white-hood, and in spite of his 5-Apha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites mutation, he is a man. In other words, through his narration of their story, he establishes a framework by which to detail his development from an immigrant status and a sexual ambiguity to a white American heterosexual male. Rachel Carroll describes such instances in the novel, as an example of retrospective logic, which she argues in her essay "Retrospective Sex: Rewriting Intersexuality in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*," "enables Eugenides to construct a narrative in which intersexed identity is experienced within a temporal and teleological structure: as having a 'before' and 'after' as departing from an origin to arrive at a given destination, as crossing a border upheld by a binary logic" (192). In other words, his story, she tells us, not only moves through time, but moves beyond boundaries where he has an incredible ability to conjure their stories. This provides him a beginning and end by which he holds up their stories and encloses them in an immobility and improbability that he narrates as not experiencing.

The final moment is not as pithy as the previous two. In this moment, the self-regulation of his white identity comes by way of a complex interplay between Cal's father and Morrison- and not to be confused with Toni Morrison, - a black guy who lives across from the Zebra Room. I argue that this moment is ancillary to Cal's attempts to secure and maintain a white male heterosexual identity throughout the course of his story. Unlike the previous moments in the novel when he recounts events about places where he was not present, his recollection in this moment of the novel includes his personal experiences; although, he has access to only partial information. The scene begins with Cal (or Calliope at the time) answering a call for Milton warning him about the riots. Milton rushes to the Zebra Room with his gun in tow and stays there for several days to safeguard it. Cal/Calliope eventually travels by bike to check on him. With a scoff at his brother and grandfather's masculinity, he shares:

I remember looking at my brother's face peeking out of his sleeping bag. On the flannel lining, hunters shot at ducks. This masculine background served only to emphasize

Chapter Eleven's [Cal's older brother] lack of heroic qualities. Who was going to come to my father's aid? Who could my father rely on? Chapter Eleven with his Coke-bottle glasses? Lefty with his chalkboard and sixty plus years?" (243).

He tries to minimize his comparison to his older brother and grandfather by saying his courage was motivated by love. However, the entire fantastical tale of him, being at the time, a seven years old girl traveling among tanks and rioting masses to save her father suggests otherwise. Nevertheless, his narrative circles around her traveling to the west side of Detroit, while her father is having an exchange with Morrison. Cal recounts that Milton and Morrison were questioning each other about their choices to remain in the hot zone of the riot. Cal informs that his father tells Morrison that his reason for being there was to "protect my property" and that Morrison tells his father that he needed a pack of cigarettes. Cal recalls that after his father gives Morrison cigarettes and takes his change, Morrison immediately asks for matches. Cal informs that after giving Morrison the matches, his father has an outburst: "Suddenly...waving his arms, indicating everything and shouting through the door, 'What's the matter with you people?' to which Morrison response, after a pause, "[t]he matter with us...is you" (245-6). Eugenides then writes the exchange as the origin, for Cal, of what would be his father mantra through which he contended with matters of race, politics, and any other thing that challenged his ideological and cultural position as a middle American second generation Greek immigrant.

In addition to this, the exchange between Milton and Morrison provides Cal a platform to establish his white male heterosexual identity throughout the rest of the novel. In this exchange, Cal highlights, perhaps unintentionally, a contrast between his father and Morrison. Both men are at the scene of the riot, but for vastly different reasons. His father owns property, Morrison wants cigarettes. Milton asks, "what's the matter with you people" and Morrison responds, "The matter with us is you." By the end of the scene, after Morrison returns home, he is presumably shot by the national guard as tanks travel down Pingree when lighting his cigarette and Milton's restaurant is torched by looters, but Milton leaves unscathed and ends up a litter bit richer.

The dynamic contrast that Eugenides writes here gives Milton and the Stephanides family a clean slate to begin again, while Morrison meets an unheroic end. Toni Morrison asserts, that this clean slate is conventional in the immigrant paradigm of American literature (25). In fact, she describes it as, "the 'clean-slate' variety, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to be born again but to be born again in new

clothes, as it were" (35). Not only does this happen for the Stephanides family, it happens for Cal as well, who writes, "But now, at age of forty-one, I feel another birth coming on" (3). Arguably, Cal's anxiety as a white male stems from the phantasmagoria of the pre-adolescent Calliope along with his father's "postwar optimism of mastering" one's own destiny, which also seems to define the parameters by which Cal attempts to address it. According to Cal, his female self in some ways threaten his existence because she is the product of his father's claims to self-made destiny. Calliope is the "irresistibly sweet, dark-eyed little girl" Milton envisioned when driving alone in the car. She is the girl that he promised Tessie during their structured and scheduled acts of copulation. She validates their family friend, Peter Tatakis' (also referred to as Uncle Pete) advice to Milton that he gathers from his reading of *Scientific America*, guaranteeing the birth of a girl. In fact, Calliope proves that Uncle Pete's instructions to Cal's parents to mate "twenty-four hours prior to ovulation," ensuring them that, "[t]hat way, the swift male sperm would rush in and die off" and "[t]he female sperm, sluggish but more reliable, would arrive just as the egg dropped" were well advised (8). Moreover, when Desdemona announces that Tessie would be having a boy, using the tradition of tying a special spoon to a string and holding it over the pregnant mother's stomach to determine the baby's gender, - a tradition she brought with her from Greece along with her flawless record of accuracy, - Milton still proclaims in response to Tessie's acceptance of Desdemona's announcement, "That's my daughter you're talking about." The fate of Cal, according to the events he recounts of his conception, seemed to seal his fate: "I was born a week after New Year's on January 8, 1960. In the waiting room, supplied only with pink-ribboned cigars, my father cried out, 'Bingo!' I was a girl" (*sic* 17). And Cal remained so until the age of fourteen. In the subsequent years, Cal would live as a male. Even though, he gives only bits and pieces of his life as a male leading up to the moment he generates the story of his family history and his blossoming relationship with Julie, what he does share in reference to the women with whom he has relationships throughout the years including his first experience with the girl he calls the "Obscure Object" or his college girlfriend, Olivia, demonstrates clearly and characteristically an uneasiness, and even distress, regarding his sexuality and the urgent need to claim a masculinity that pushes against the parameters set by Calliope and his father's desire and postwar optimism for a baby girl.

Cal's witness to his father's death offers one of most salient moments in the novel concerning his approach to regulating his anxiety. Quite characteristic of an oedipal narrative, not only does Cal interpret his intersexuality as a thing that confronts his father's masculinity in the frame of postwar America; he also deems his father's masculinity as the thing that suppresses his masculinity. As abovementioned, Milton predestined Cal's gender as a girl and when Cal's male physiology started to take precedence over that of his female physiology, Milton had the principal authority to make the decision to confirm Cal's female gender under the medical and surgical advice of Dr. Luce, the doctor and leading "authority on human hermaphroditism," who Cal's parents consulted in New York after Cal's condition was discovered (433). Although, Cal runs away to California to escape his father's control over his gender, he still possesses a close proximity to knowledge regarding the events that led to his father's death. Granted, Cal establishes a pervasive spectator position with even some of the more minor characters in his story such as Dr. Philobosian's (his grandparent's companion on the travel to the U.S. and later their family doctor) son who is murdered by Turkish soldiers the night Desdemona and Lefty left Greece; however, the story he recounts of the moments leading to and after Milton's death, which includes the thoughts and emotions with which his father wrestles at his last breath, coalesces neatly with his objective to regulate, calibrate, and even discipline his white (male) identity. For example, Cal accounts allow him to detail Milton's anxiety after receiving calls extorting money for the whereabouts of Calliope, even though Cal had, at that point in history, settled in San Francisco. It also permits him to give an account of his parents' decision to return to Grosse Pointe to continue their search for Calliope, even as Calliope is transforming to Cal on her hitchhiking adventure to California. It grants Cal access to his father's fears and consternation provoked by a call he receives requesting \$25,000 in exchange for Calliope; although, during this same period Cal is across the country working at the Octopussy's Garden show room, where he displays his body in a water tank for people to pay to see him. Additionally, through his account, Cal recounts how Milton was incredulous to find that his brother-and-law, Father Mike, was the one extorting him for money. His spectator position even makes possible the story of the events surrounding Milton's car chase with Father Mike that ends with a ten-car pileup on the Ambassador Bridge and of the sorrow Milton expresses when he realizes that he is dead and has failed to rescue Calliope. For instance, he recalls how, "Milton bellowed in the Cadillac as the car began, once again, to descend" and that "[h]e was

crying not because he was about to die but because I, Calliope, was still gone, because he had failed to save me, because he had done everything he could to get me back and I was still missing” (511). In short, Cal’s recollection of his father’s death allows him to generate a narrative that illustrates a mourning for the loss of Calliope (Cal’s female self) and elucidates his father’s inability to prevent that loss or to induce a recovery (i.e. the surgery). This is further made clear in Cal’s lament to his father’s passing:

Most important, Milton got out without ever seeing me again. That would not have been easy. I like to think that my father’s love for me was strong enough that he could have accepted me. But in some ways it’s better that we never had to work that out, he and I. With respect to my father I will always remain a girl (512).

In many ways, Cal concedes, in this passage, that his life as a girl was tied closely to the life of his father; however, it also recuperates for him in the telling a masculinity not threatened by the presence or memory of his father. The irony, here, however, shows up poignantly in the Oedipal narrative of Cal’s story, being that Cal pushes against his father’s postwar masculinity in defining his destiny as a girl; but, he does not totally disavow his father’s masculinity as it exemplifies the white ethnic immigrant paradigm of assimilation into America particularly, in relation to the social reproductions of U.S. capital production and accumulation.

If we return to the moment in the chapter, “Opa!” and the exchange between Milton and Morrison that allowed Cal to create a contrast between the two, then perhaps we can see how he establishes a white male heterosexual identity. Through the use of a black presence represented in Morrison, Cal conjures an identity for his father premised on all the things he is and is not in contrast to Morrison: He is a property owner who protects his property during the time of the riots/he is not a man buying cigarettes and asking for matches during the riots. He asks, “what’s the matter with you”/he does not say “the matter with me is you.” He lives/he does not die at that time, etc. The contrasting images creates for Milton an identity of property ownership, courage, purpose, personal responsibility, characteristic of not blaming others, and so forth- all the things that are used to define the black presence. In this scene, we are confronted with the creation of the image of an Oedipal subject by which Cal uses to transition into his manhood. This Oedipal subject, being his father, epitomizes the white male par excellence according to the constructs of white identity. Therefore, by establishing an identity for his father based on the construction of whiteness of what his father is and what his father is not and by “killing” his father

according to the Oedipal logic, he is able to access and assume a distinctly white heterosexual male identity.

Middlesex: An Aesthetic Failure or a Novel that Plays in the Dark?

Many critics of *Middlesex* recognize a contradiction in narration and in its persistence in securing for the third generation intersexed Greek American an identity distinctly white, heterosexual, and male. They deem *Middlesex* an aesthetic failure, even though *Middlesex* won a Pulitzer Prize in fiction (Merton Lee 2010; Sarah Graham 2009; Debra Shostak 2008; Samuel Cohen 2007). The novel's failure, according to these critics (as they take great caution in acknowledging that this description may offer very little by way of an intellectual inquiry), is its inability to maintain the primacy of the middle way or betweenness, which it uses to plot a first and third person narrated coming of age tale about Cal Stephanides. They uphold that *Middlesex* is a unique work of fiction that follows the traditional immigrant family saga narrative from the viewpoint of a Greek immigrant family's assimilation into American culture, given that Cal opens up a traumatic and surreptitious past about his grandparents' consanguinity, their migration from Bithynios during the Great Fire of Smyrna in 1922 to Detroit, and the Stephanides's family experiences during epochs of Detroit history; and loops it around a narrative about his preteen years growing up as girl in Detroit and later, its suburbs with an awareness about his physical differences and sexual attractions. The effect of this, they observe, is that not only does the novel cleave to discourses of heteronormativity; but it also mobilizes them to give the main character a route of escape from his intersexuality. This route of escape, according to these critics, gets established in the novel's narrative about a self-making, self-determining man, who, against genetic odds, configures for himself an identity as a white heterosexual male and does so by intertwining his experiences growing up intersexed with a story about his family's history. However, if we consider the trajectory and closure of the story from the lens of self-regulation, then perhaps the novel is not a failed book at all. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that the novel meets the expectations of its aesthetic objective, which is to reconfigure and rediscover the prototypical white male. Lest we forget, as several critics have pointed out, the novel attempts to other Cal as a white male immigrant, whose position as a Greek male other would not exist otherwise.

In view of what Morrison informs us about African Americanism, or the black presence in American literature, we have been able to explore self-regulation in *Middlesex*. We have been able to examine it for the ways self-making and self-determination encloses whiteness in the novel; especially considering that Eugenides' configures Cal's white male identity in the historical framework of the European (white) ethnic immigrant: A framework that scholars, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, say encloses an "European immigrant analogy" of race that assumes that "the 'difference' that characterizes a minority group, once incorporated, will be outweighed by the 'commonality' it shares with the majority" (21). Chu, in particular, reads it for the correlation the novel makes between Cal, a third-generation Greek American male made other through the biological anomaly of intersexuality, and ethnic white masculinity forged in exceptionalist ideas bridled to 20th century notions of progress and work. Just as important is the question she poses to draw attention to Cal's intersexuality in the configuration of the white middle class: "Is the 'alias of his [Cal's] new gender' also an alias for Eugenides, a way to revive the immigrant dream of (white) self-making," thereby, giving a new context to the conflict of sexuality in the novel (282). This question is demonstrative of the scholarly work of David Roediger, Robin Kelley, and others who make the correlation between the development of the American middle class and formation of whiteness. This formation, Roediger asserts, if we recall, "was a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and the necessities of capitalist work discipline" (13). This may help to explain why numerous critics have contributed the tensions of ethnicity and sexuality in the novel to not only a story that follows the "familiar model of immigrant narrative" and that leans upon the imaginings and remembering of a history; but also, to one that tells of the struggles of assimilation into the American middle class. Stephanie Hsu, for instance, in "Ethnicity and the Biopolitics of Intersex in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*," writes, "As parallel emplotments, Cal (whose female self is known as Calliope or Callie) Stephanides's accounts of his family's immigration history and his gender transition suggest that the successful assimilation of the ethnic subject into the American middle class also points to the domestication of intersex phenomena" (88). Merton Lee, in his essay, "Why Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* Is So Inoffensive," makes a similar claim in his exploration of the inoffensiveness of *Middlesex* to America's heterosexual sensibility. He writes, "The allegorical meaning that the main narrative gestures toward is that all manner of heterogeneous, unruly past events, can be tamed and assimilated such that

the smooth, uncontested surface of the present or the null ethnicity of white America, contains the only relevance,” which addresses the speculation he articulates at the beginning of his essay regarding the interrelation of gender and ethnicity in *Middlesex* “to determine whether the apparently assimilationist resolution- in which the Stephanideses are comfortable in their middle class status and Cal is comfortably male- really presents a vision amenable to a bland conciliatory acceptance of contemporary America” (40;33). Debra Shostak argues in the same vein as Merton Lee that the novel does not offer a “fantasy of some theoretically plausible political transformation” (410). The question of intersexuality that governs the telling of the Stephanides’s story, according to Shostak, represents Cal not as a “rebel but rather an undemonstrative, modestly socialized person who desires to live according to the norm. Like his grandparents, he is a middle American who struggles to find a place in the middle” (410-11). Rachel Carroll adding another layer to it writes, “Indeed, the Stephanides family’s American story charts an assimilationist imperative which first challenges but then compounds racial and ethnic hierarchies” (189). In this passage, Carroll reminds us that the assimilationist imperative of this novel confirms Chu’s observation of the white self-making that posits his story of intersexuality at the heart of racial codifications. Essentially, what all these scholars seem to point to is a correlation between Eugenides’ exploration of intersexuality and assimilation into American white middle class. However, what does not receive much attention beyond contextualizing the term “intersex” within political stances against and biological resistance to binary logics of sexuality within the frame of ethnicity and sexuality is the ways this correlation between intersexuality and the American middle class intersects contemporary concerns with work in America alongside the more obvious concerns relating to assimilation, difference, inclusion/exclusion, and belonging that are framed by a black presence (Rachel Carroll, 2012; Stephanie Hsu, 2011; Merton Lee, 2010; Sarah Graham, 2009).

Conclusion

Made most famous by Ralph Ellison in his novel, *Invisible Man*, when his protagonist while working at Liberty Paint is told to add ten drops of black liquid to white paint to make it optic white, the idea of constructions of whiteness generated in contrast to a black presence has been part of thinking about whiteness for some time now. David Wellman and Toni Morrison are among the numerous scholars who contribute conceptions and theories about the black presence in constructing a white identity to

studies of whiteness. Particularly, they discuss the black presence for the ways it provides such constructions with language to say what it is and what it is not. They also highlight the paradox of it in the construction of white identity that seek its domination in an identity of whiteness even as it desires the privileges of its domination to be invisible in American culture for ways that appear natural or universal. In short, both articulate the function of black presence that is used in the construction of white identities.

If we really question this apparent assimilation into the American middle class and the construction of white (male identity) premised in what it is and what it is not, as the scholars mentioned above have done so effectively, does Eugenides' employment of the concept of hermaphrodite generates as Lee Merton argues, a way to conceptualize Cal as "self-consciously Greek" in a time when generally "Greek ethnicity within America has nearly become simply another form of whiteness" (34)? And by using this strategy, does this allow him to place at the fore a crisis with white heterosexual male identity in the form of intersexuality by which the Greek American male, - being made other, having a variation of the typical sexual anatomy- must overcome in order to challenge differences and find his place in American culture? If so, then to what end? Is it for the purpose of remembering "that all manner of heterogeneous, unruly past events, can be tamed and assimilated such that the smooth, uncontested surface of the present or the null ethnicity of white America, contains the only relevance," as Merton puts it? Or is it the black presence? Is this not all a matter of self-regulating his white (male) identity?

CHAPTER 5: CLOSING THOUGHTS

I tried, in this dissertation, to map out a strategy to read literature through self-regulation as a mode, concept, and idea. Delivering a critique on the ideology of responsibility that obfuscates work under the banner of self-regulation, I explored various cultural productions in the period of 1980s forward that either directly or indirectly dealt with themes of work. I sought to conceptualize the ways sentimentalities of accountability and blame place the onus of adjusting, recalibrating, and disciplining the self on the individual with the intended purpose of enforcing the requisite of self-regulation in accordance with the ideology of responsibility of this late stage of capital and to capture it within American literature.

Also, my intent was to hint at the implications of this self-regulation on the field itself. I wanted to hold up this dissertation as an entry into such considerations. As the field of America studies, and humanities in general, struggles, in a very real sense, to find security in an economy invested in dismantling it from the site of its relevance; and thus, causing it to face what Sarika Chandra points out, in her book, *Dislocalism*, its obsolescence; the question of how to regulate the field to the logics of capitalism definitely casts its shadow. For this reason, I am of the mind that the need to redefine itself has become an imperative of self-regulation, even as it seeks to asks itself about inclusivity and about expanding its borders of inquiry located in questions such as “what does America mean today;” “what does it mean in the context of the global;” or “what do we think about ideas such as freedom and independence?” Embedded in these questions is, undeniably, a call to reexamine itself through the lens of self-reorganization. This call of self-reorganization, I advise, is a call to self-regulate and it is being heard in the field. I offer up Hua Hsu’s essay, “Capital Rules Everything Around Me,” as an example.

Several years ago, I read Hsu’s article, which was published in the *American Quarterly*. In it, he addresses several concerns he has regarding inclusivity (in the larger context of African American literature and a more focus scope on hip hop culture) in relation to the field of humanities summed up in the following questions: Why is it still holding to ‘centuries-dead topics’ and how does it try to contend with relevancy as questions of obsolesce and “value gain traction” (132)? Embedded in his concerns about the field, besides the obvious anxieties of its relevance, are inquiries about self-regulation. In other words, in his discussion about the importance of ethnic studies and popular culture studies, he hints at the self-regulation paradigm by appearing to ask the field: How are you going to adapt, adjust, recalibrate,

and discipline yourself to the current mandates of capitalism? This may explain the title of the article, which also references a famous Wu Tang Clan song, "Cash Rules Everything Around Me." Perhaps, in Hsu's questioning of the relevancy of the field and its needs to consider other studies that it seems so hesitant to include, he is simply asking what could be a common sense question: If the world has changed, the issues are new and reflective of those changes, and more people of different backgrounds, colors, gender, and status are obviously influencing these changes, then why has the field not changed as well? Why does it not become more inclusive? Why does its inquiry about the human question and condition not reflect such changes?

Nevertheless, we can't ignore that these questions for him are framed in what he sees as the larger social condition that makes them exigent. In a very direct way, he blames the academy for its crisis and through this blame poses the solution. So it makes sense that when he directs attention to the "[r]ising costs, woefully inefficient PhD programs, the illogic of tenure, and grade inflation have all come to stand in for a system that, according to its harshest critics, remains unresponsive to changing social and economic needs" he would cite, "[a]mong the stickiest and most evocative criticisms is the academy's willful obscurantism, particularly within the humanities, as scholars luxuriate in sundry centuries-dead topics while real problems beg for solutions" (131-2). His solution is, "As questions of relevance and value gain traction, one might assume that efforts to teach socially relevant material long marginalized by mainstream culture would be self-evidently useful, or at least broadly, reflexively defensible" (132). Here, it is clear that for Hsu the crises the academy faces are special to this period, given that this period is, on the one hand, largely defined by critical scholarship regarding the question of inclusion; and on the other hand, by capitalism's needs to seek out new routes to obtain surplus value including restructuring educational institutions. The result is that it places the responsibility on such institutions to self-regulate (or to adjust, recalibrate, prioritize, and discipline) to the "education" market; and it holds these institutions accountable for their inability to do so. To this end, I have tried to demonstrate in my dissertation not just the importance of recognizing this phenomenon; but also, the significance of identifying the ways it has influenced if not taken root in our literary and cultural productions and criticism.

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ABSTRACT**TOWARD A THEORY OF WORK: PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY, SELF-REGULATION, AND
IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF AMERICA'S WORK CRISIS**

by

KATRINA NEWSOM**August 2018****Advisor:** Dr. Sarika Chandra**Major:** English**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

Toward a Theory of Work: Personal Responsibility, Self-Regulation, and Identity in the Age of America's Work Crisis examines how American culture grapples with work in the Post-Fordist era of production, particularly in the areas of ethnic, working-class, cultural, and literary studies. Specific to these areas are ideas of (personal) responsibility that take shape in concepts of self-regulation invented to function as both a direct and indirect redress to the retooling of work in the U.S. of the late 1970s and early 80s forward. As this retooling of work seeks to meet the demands of global expansion of markets and financialization; and collides with the social order of work within nationalist paradigms, it also ushers in a labor reality for the U.S. workforce that necessitates adjustment, recalibration, and discipline of one's inner self to the patterns and demands of the current stage of capitalism. This dissertation explores how this shows up in American literature and cultural production of the post-1980s with a specific focus on immigrant literature, undercover reporting, and postfeminist films. Through an analysis of these mediums, self-regulation is interrogated for the ways it mystifies questions of work for what appear as more advanced questions of race, sexuality, and gender.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Katrina Newsom is a native Detroiter. She received a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College in 2005 and a master's degree from Wayne State University in 2011. Ms. Newsom's research interests include late twentieth and early twenty-first century American literature with an emphasis on work studies and ethnic literatures.