

THE (CLASS) STRUGGLE IS REAL(LY QUEER): A BILATERAL
INTERVENTION INTO WORKING-CLASS STUDIES AND QUEER THEORY

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Kenneth P. Dietrich Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2016

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
DEITRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

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Class issues have become more present in media and literary studies, as the gap between the upper and lower classes has widened. Meanwhile, scholars in the growing field of working-class studies attempt to define what working-class literature is by formulating criteria for what kinds of people count as working-class, based on moral values supposedly held by working-class people. Usually, working-class people are envisioned as white, heteronormative, and dignified legitimate workers. Working-class studies seldom engages with queer theory or conventional forms of identity politics. Conversely, queer theorists often reference class, but abandon it in favor of other topics. This dissertation argues that working-class studies needs a queering, and that queer theory needs a more pointed class analysis.

I begin with a close look at queer people of color in media, first revisiting the 1990 documentary film *Paris is Burning*. I examine how failure relates to the lives of the queens portrayed, how class complicates failure's potential resistance, and how drag performances comprise highly class-critical social commentary. *Ru Paul's Drag Race* and the photography of Pittsburgh artist Caldwell Linker are compared with the film. In my second chapter, I analyze the television series *Breaking Bad* and argue that the limited scope of working-class character in working-class studies obscures the exploitation of non-normative Others by Walter White, who is not a working-class hero, but a high capitalist rising to power in the economy of illicit drug

manufacturing. In my last chapter, I explore the issues of class and abjection in three contemporary novels, *Bastard out of Carolina*, by Dorothy Allison, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, by Carolyn Chute, and *Push*, by Sapphire. This chapter asks questions about extremes of class and queer failure, and the impact of intersectionality on the ostensible resistance that contemporary queer theories of abjection claim.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is an intimidating number of people to whom I owe gratitude for helping me along the way. Firstly, of course, my co-advisors, Nancy Glazener, who is the best, most thorough reader a graduate student could have, and Nicholas Coles, cheerleader, eyeroller, and editor extraordinaire. My other committee members, William Scott, Mark Lynn Anderson, and Brent Malin have my gratitude for staying with me through rough early stages and to my defense. I appreciate how available and supportive the members of my committee have been all along.

Other colleagues at Pitt and elsewhere to whom I am grateful for their input and support include Ellen McGrath Smith, Robin Clarke, Troy Boone, Neepa Majumdar, Jenny Johnson, Julie Beaulieu, Matt Kendrick, Alicia Williamson, Sara Appel, Nathan Bryant, Colleen Jankovic, Molly Nichols, Joanna Collins, Robert Bailey, Veronica Fitzpatrick, Kristi Fallica, Eric Vasquez, Brandon Masterman, Kathleen Murray, CM Burroughs, Ryan Pierson, Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, and Christopher Hill. Kerry Mockler has been my go-to for formatting questions and affirmations, and she gave me my dissertation title. Mark Kemp is near and dear to my heart for helping me get out of trouble more than once. The administrative staff of the English Department, relatedly, has made life as a graduate student and instructor at Pitt navigable for me. My sincerest thanks to the members of the Working-Class Studies Association.

Thank you to the baristas at Tazza D'Oro, Artisan, Commonplace Coffee, and Constellation Coffee. Special thank you to Elliot Williams and Catapult Co-Working Community for giving me a place to sit and work. Thank you to Crossfit Pittsburgh for helping me keep my limbs alive while I worked on this dissertation.

To my close and long-time friends Jennifer Boland, Katy, Corey, Miles, Felix, and Oren Lev, Jenn Curton Heron and Ari Kretschmer Heron, and many, many others, I want to extend my thanks for giving support and love throughout the years that I have worked on this project.

To my oldest friend, Michael Carnahan, who is lost in tragic queer failure, I wish health and sobriety.

Extra special thanks to my mother, Sandra Kumar, and my aunt, Debbie Bell, and my extended family, who have watched me accomplish this work from my home of Colorado.

To my love, Emily Zuzack, for giving me a reason to finish, and reminding me that there's a world outside of graduate school. Thank you for putting up with me when I was busy, tired, anxious, and pre-occupied.

Many beloved people have passed away during the time that I have been a PhD student. I want to honor these people, who I miss: my uncle Bob Bell, my grandfather Bill Bell, my friends Amy Patterson, Ninny Rank, and Professor Eric Clarke, and my great-aunt Jackie Garrett. Lastly, this dissertation is dedicated to my best friend, my biggest supporter, and my inspiration, my grandmother, Joan Zobel. I wish more than anything that she could have seen me finish this work.

Introduction

An Immoral Marriage:

Why Working-Class Studies and Queer Theory Need Each Other

Working-class studies and queer theory need one another, yet they rarely engage each other in any substantive way. There has been a tendency in the burgeoning discipline of working-class studies to attempt to clearly define what working-class literature is by formulating criteria for what kinds of people are worth studying as working-class. When I set out to write this dissertation, I meant to show how queer failure could help broaden the definition of what makes the working class, and provide ways of thinking about how certain rejections of behavioral norms and value systems have radical and resistive potential. It struck me that there was a near-Reaganist moralism trickling down through working-class studies—not because the scholars themselves are bigoted or hyper-moral, but because, in the desire to respect and emphasize the voices of the working class, the loudest voices within that enormous demographic are allowed to speak for all and construct a normativity within it.

It was significant to me that working-class studies was born in the Reagan era and built up through the political shift to the right since the Reagan era. The Reagan Era took up a pathologizing vision of the poor that had been derived from attitudes about normalcy that emerged out of post-WWII economic prosperity and ill-conceived sociological studies in mid 20th century. Michael Harrington's book, *The Other America*, explains how changing infrastructure in cities after WWII, particularly the expansion of suburbs, isolated and contained

the poor, allowing middle- and upper-class America to forget about poverty—so much so that the poor and their lifestyles became unthinkable and alien.

Separately, in the 1960s, *The Moynihan Report* claimed that the problem of black poverty was caused not by the lack of available jobs or other structural conditions, but rather by destructive elements of black culture, such as childbirth out of wedlock and lack of ambition. The notion of a “culture of poverty” has been revisited time and again since then. The report itself was revisited by the news media in the 1980s, in reports like Bill Moyers’ CBS Special *The Vanishing Black Family* which both contributed to and were informed by the right-wing pathologizing of “welfare queens” and other poor people. While working-class studies scholarship works against these stereotypes, it has mainly done so by arguing from within the framework that generates them—by denying the immorality of the working class, rather than rejecting moralism altogether.

Related to the problem of the shift to the right and the emergence of working-class studies, scholars work to avoid reifying hierarchical structures by privileging the issues and concerns of working-class people over the elitist viewpoints of academics. Because of this impulse, these scholars exhibit some heavy apologism for prejudice, xenophobia, and moral rigidity in the working class. The excitement I felt in joining queer theory to working-class studies was primarily at the prospect of undoing the homogenizing, normativizing trend in working-class studies by showing how the “bad” working class and poor have revolutionary and resistive potential moreso than the “good” and “stable” of these underclasses. This is not always the case, I realize; sometimes they do effectively resist, and sometimes their lives are grave symbols of the harshness of capitalist society. The point is, however, that whether or not the

failure of queers and other supposedly immoral people is resistive, their lives are classed—they are worthy of examination in working-class studies.

One effect of intensive efforts to distinguish what makes a person working-class and what constitutes working-class culture is the exclusion of many economically vulnerable people, working and precarious. I began this project having noticed that queer theory was often underscored by references to class issues and poverty, while working-class studies has seldom engaged queer theory or conventional forms of identity politics. Many working-class critics and scholars reject identity politics as secondary or detrimental to class politics, although some take an inclusive or intersectional approach to understanding difference within the working classes.

Crucially, the relationship of queerness and queer theory to identity politics is contested. The term “queer” is a reclaimed epithet for a person known or suspected of same-sex desire or gender non-conformity of one kind or another. It was taken up by scholars as a rethinking of the world in relation to LGBT lives, but has come to encapsulate critiques of normativity and rejection of social categorization across a range of social positionalities—sexuality, gender, race, nationality, and so on. Queer theorists generally argue that queerness is meant to undo identity by denying and breaking down sex and gender categories—and ultimately all categories—in order that coalition-building might be based on difference rather than sameness. In this respect, queerness is connected to intersectionality, because, historically, its intention was to undo the stranglehold of white middle-class normativity over LGBT politics and scholarship. Similarly, Kimberlé Crenshaw, in theorizing intersectionality, substantially reconfigured the abiding reductiveness in identity politics, which often focused on only one element of identity to form a cohesive politics. Crenshaw observes, “The problem with identity politics is that ...it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences...[I]gnoring difference *within* groups contributes to

tension *among* groups” (1242, emphasis Crenshaw’s). Her work in theorizing intersectionality is largely in response to the inherent blindness of white middle-class feminism to the specificity of black and working-class women’s needs and priorities, disregarding how other factors alter concerns and priorities of people who within those categories. The work I do here is intersectional at its root, because it concerns the intersection of class with non-normativity of all kinds, which I read through the lens of queerness.

Scholars in working-class studies often pathologize and devalue moral non-normativity in the same way that dominant sexual mores, which now include the newly welcomed homonormativity, insist upon a full cleave away from the sexually “immoral” or illegible.¹ I use the term “moralism” to characterize this tendency of scholars in working-class studies to determine who belongs in the working class according to some moral standard; the term here denotes the operation of normative, conventional, and seemingly apolitical codes of behavior. Because of the resonance between conservative moralism and the valorization of moral normativity in working-class studies, this project pivots on the premise that a merging of working-class studies with queer studies is necessary and advantageous.

Drawing from multiple mediums—television, film, photography, viral news stories, and contemporary U.S. fiction—I reinterpret outcroppings of negativity and failure from texts that are already widely recognized as having class-critical edges, such as Dorothy Allison’s impactful novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and the television drama *Breaking Bad*. I also present and analyze texts that have been left out of consideration as working-class because they depict racial, sexual, and behavioral failures, some of which are recognized as queer in nature and subject.

¹ The term homonormativity is generally credited to queer theorist Lisa Duggan, from her article, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” and her book *Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. It refers to GLBT activism that seeks assimilation into mainstream white capitalist culture. Rather than to break down dominant systems of oppression, homonormativity merely seeks inclusion for upstanding gays into normativity.

These include the documentary film *Paris is Burning* and the novel *Push*, by Sapphire. I use these texts to show the significance of these texts and subject matters to working-class and anti-capitalist politics, and to show the lives depicted not merely as unfortunate effects of poverty and class oppression, but as legitimate, attention-worthy lives negotiating the demands of capital.

A key intervention I hope to make in working-class studies is to challenge the tendency of scholars to distinguish between working-class people based on very dated behavioral categories that take heteronormativity for granted. Using sociological distinctions posed in the 1950s through the 1970s, working-class studies scholars such as Jack Metzgar and Janet Zandy define working-class people by a distinct set of cultural characteristics, drawn from the moral values of the working-class people they consider mainstream. The continued use of these conservative and outdated sociological analyses as formulas for thinking about contemporary working-class people limits what working-class studies can do—a problem that I hope to help change with this dissertation.

In the foundational book *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, working-class studies heavyweight Michael Zweig argues that most Americans are working-class. If this is the case, then relying on the moral norms of mainstream working-class people is actually merely relying on the social conservatism of the mainstream at large. Even if the mainstream is comprised of mainly working-class people, it is not necessarily working-class people who shape mainstream culture. The tendency to value moralist codes held by some working-class people constitutes apologism for the socio-cultural status quo, which excludes broad swathes of people from consideration. Sadly, works by leftist scholars that define the working class by particular values and dispositions sustain the moral codes that drive the right, even as they critique it.

The use of older models of sociological analysis puts scholarship about the contemporary working class in a normative stasis, and creates a scholarly blind spot with regard to the diversity within the working class. Metzgar uses sociologist Lillian Rubin's 1976 study on working-class families, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class family* to underscore his participation in ongoing discourse about how to make sense of working-class misbehavior. Rubin's push to reclaim dignity for the working class leads her to coin the terms "settled-living" and "hard-living" to distinguish between types of working-class people's behavior. In addition, Metzgar applies the term "maladapted," a term invented by the work of earlier sociologist Herbert Gans, to identify a subcategory of what he calls "action-seekers" (contrasted with "routine-seekers" and paralleling Rubin's "hard-living.")² "Maladapted" describes those who are "unable to control their behavior" and are somehow innately immoral and unrestrained. Metzgar justifies this pejorative category on the basis of a sensibility he shares with his working-class family about how some people are just not the same.

In contrast to such efforts to distinguish among people living in poverty and precarity, however, it is important to recognize that "the poor" are not separate from the working class. Metzgar repeatedly revisits Zweig's relatively traditional Marxist viewpoint on class distinctions. That is, those who own the means of production are of the capitalist class, and those who do not are the working class. Zweig's classifications are purely economic, and his inclusion of the poor into the working class is based on this crisp and simple configuration. Metzgar also reiterates Zweig's observation that poverty is a condition that befalls working-class people intermittently over the course of their lives. The shifting of those who do not own the means of production between economic stability (even when income is meager) and hardship means that poverty is

² Gans' book, *The Urban Villagers: Group and class in the life of Italian Americans*, was published in 1962, in part as a defense of Italian Americans living in the West End of Boston who were demonized by the middle-class.

not a class status, but is the circumstance of increased hardship for people of the working class. This is sensible; a lot of working-class people slip in and out of poverty. However, there are some social groups and individuals who live lives of persistent poverty because of the intersection they occupy between class and other identities and factors.

Metzgar wants to honor the "cultural repertoire" of those he perceives as "stable-living" working-class, however, because it is valuable to most of the working-class people he knows. He defines "cultural repertoire" according to Michele Lamont's understanding: "'a publicly available categorization system' that shapes behavior" (399). Lamont's and Metzgar's usage of this rubric is moralistic, as the example of Metzgar's deployment of "maladapted" demonstrated. Of himself, Metzgar writes, "I have cultivated sympathy for hard-livers, but only if they work hard, are responsible, and help keep the work in moral order" (407). While I am myself, like Metzgar, a strongly settled-living working-class routine-seeker, I find it hard not to perceive this view as stunted. Not everyone in poverty has access to hard work, or to work that is recognized as such (based on moral distinctions and juridical divisions). Likewise, there are extensive differences of experience as to what constitutes responsibility and what one might be responsible for.

There is heterochauvinist paternalism in the vision of responsibility insinuated in Metzgar's argument. Rubin's definition of settled and hard-living is based on the presumption of patriarchal heterosexuality in the working class. Metzgar quotes Rubin extensively to explain stable-livers as those living in families made up of employed mothers and fathers (mostly fathers) whose children are neatly, though not expensively, dressed, and who go to school and otherwise behave themselves, while hard-living "'families were characterized by fathers with chaotic work histories'" and children whose lives were marred by paternal or parental alcoholism and violence (403). The problem of heteronormativity in this is multifaceted; many, many

working-class people and poor people are not involved in family life, do not have or do not desire fathers.

These conceptions are embarrassingly old-fashioned for scholars in working-class studies to be drawing from without serious reformulation. Even though Metzgar does not believe there should be a class distinction between the Reaganist "deserving poor" and "undeserving poor" (Reagan's "welfare queen" being the mythical place-holder for this), he proposes an intensely forgiving, even supportive view of working-class moralism that mirrors these Reaganesque moralistic distinctions: "The disciplined pursuit of a settled, routine, reliable, responsible life when such a life is hard to achieve, when most days you hate what you have to do to earn a living, when almost every day you have to deny and suppress your desires and inclinations in order to 'hold yourself together,' may require a certain moral fervor against the danger of being poor" (413). While this appears to be an understandable mode of self-defense for people whose security is precarious, it is generally ineffectual in challenging capitalism or the class system. Likewise, a close investigation reveals that the first to be excluded when some people's sense of morality transforms into moralism are people of color and queer people. Therefore, moralism has no place in a politics based on solidarity and collectivity. Stability is comfortable; it is also counter-revolutionary and affirmative of the class system.

Metzgar proposes, "[T]he problem is that we liberals, broadly conceived, tend to accidentally disrespect and dishonor the working-class's core cultural repertoire, as we rightfully attack the moral stigma it attaches to being poor," and that "we middle-class progressives have been humbled (and thus made wiser) by conservative political hegemony" (16). The problem here, of course, is that in exploring the possibilities of excluding the "maladapted," he's already concluded that they are separate from the rest of the working class, and are of lesser value than

others. Likewise, his approach takes moralism as a given and relocates the judgment onto others instead of rejecting it outright.

Scholars in the field often pose "settled-livers" as representative of true working-class values, and resign "hard-livers" to being accidents of class and disposition—corrupted and warped, and in need of correction. This way of viewing working-class people is especially inflected by the location and description, and subsequent prescription of a semi-stable “working-class culture,” which consistently reinscribes white, heterosexual re/productivity as the basis of working-class experience. Because most of the U.S. is working-class, there is no single culture that ought to stand for the working class. While I suggest that many working-class studies scholars, even those whose moralism I critique, will acknowledge the connections between racial and sexist prejudices, I am not certain that all would recognize the connections between the force of moralism itself and these inequities. Moralism, though, is always exclusionary—it is always based on sets of parameters that make certain lives and people unthinkable.

Janet Zandy, a scholar working to cultivate a working-class literary canon in the United States, has herself posited a rubric for what makes a text definitively working-class. In *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*, Zandy inquires into the nature of working-class culture, and asks questions about the role of the writer and other cultural producers in telling the stories of laborers and their physical toils. Importantly, Zandy argues for the importance of bringing the harshness of physical labor into other “cleaner” social spheres, and exposing the hazards and dangers of life at work to those who are not subject to them due to economic privilege: “Carrying the hump of memory about physical labor into polite and clean circles of knowledge and power is one way to practice working-class agency” (39). Zandy rightly believes that forcing the masses to confront images of pain and violence resulting from the hardships of

labor builds class-consciousness that moves toward resistance to worker exploitation. It is meant to foster a sense of dignity in laboring. Zandy's belief in the purpose of working-class literature as a way to confront readers with the physical hardship and sacrifice of conventional labor is the springboard for the larger question of her book: "How can exposure to representations of labor enlarge class consciousness?" (40). She misses, though, the connected question of how witnessing or understanding the traumas of those who aren't stably laboring (the unemployed, or those employed in informal economies of sex, drugs, or other crime), or the psychological traumas experienced by exploited workers in service and clerical industries, can render the kind of angry response that the more visceral revelation of physical trauma creates. From her questions, Zandy moves to define working-class literature according to her own writerly agenda (to expose others to images of violence). The result of her definition is an equally limited view of the kind of literature that can create class-consciousness, or at least a strong critique of the capitalist system.

In forming a definition of working-class literature, Zandy writes, "One of the ways working-class literature is distinct from bourgeois literature is in its emphasis on the physicality of work...Injuries and deaths accumulate in working-class literature. Narrative shifts hinge on work that kills and maims" (43). Here, Zandy explicitly insists on the specific scene and setting of work and laborers that hearkens back to delineations made by Mike Gold, and to the kinds of texts produced during the 1930s that have been canonized as the primary symbols of proletarian, communist, and working-class literature.³ In the economy we are currently in, this stand is both inclusive, because it acknowledges the continued existence of a proletariat in the United States,

³ Mike Gold's 1929 manifesto, "Go Left, Young Writer," published in *New Masses*, imagined proletarian fiction as written by a young male who worked in industry by day and wrote by night specifically about labor and union activity.

and incomplete. Much of today's proletariat is made up of racial and ethnic others—illegal immigrants from Mexico, for instance—who work on farms, in factories, and in kitchens, who are willing to take toiling physical jobs at low pay, because they are unable to get other low-paying clerical or service jobs that go to legal citizens, English-speakers, those who convey an appropriately moderate level of education, and those who are more socially palatable than their peers. Zandy's approach also ignores the huge number of people who are not part of the workforce—a privilege in itself, despite its hardships. Zandy's concern with what "kills and maims" is significant to my work here because she omits from her canon representations of the killing and maiming of working-class people outside scenes of traditional, "legitimate" labor.

In fairness, Zandy explains in *Hands* that the effort to formulate a definition of working-class literature was provoked by the MLA's rejection of a proposal to create a permanent discussion group on working-class literature. Among her criteria are very helpful prompts for classifying these texts, such as the presentation of working people *as* people and not things or parts acting metonymically for whole persons. She also wants working-class literature to "give language to human suffering and grief," which is a perspective that I share, since my concern is illuminating classed hardship that has been overshadowed by moralism. On the other hand, Zandy also proposes that working-class humor and joy should be portrayed in these texts. This is good for the purpose of humanizing working-class people, but it alludes to a belief in a relatively homogenous singular working-class culture, or at least multiple subcultures within the working class that relate to one another on the intimate level of humor and joy—a fictitious aspiration (91).

Zandy begins with the importance of grounding the text in the social: "The working-class writer has a heightened consciousness of the multiple 'we' inside the writer's 'I.'"

Grounding in the social and collective experience of a class is a worthy aim, and certainly a great deal of working-class literature moves from this underpinning. However, books like Sapphire's *Push*, and even moreso the sequel to *Push*, entitled *The Kid*, focus on the highly classed experiences of people whose oppressive and traumatic circumstances are lived in isolation, due to stigma, shame, and abjection. Additionally, the enormity of the working class in the U.S. means that iterations of "we" are often in opposition to one another, and some instantiations of the working-class "we" are given privilege over others.⁴

Zandy concedes that such distinctions have value primarily for the critic by noting that "[d]ebates about classification...matter to students of literature, but I doubt if working people care about such categories" (44). She thereby suggests that working-class readers might distance themselves from constraints divined by critics such as herself (if they are aware of them in the manner that scholars are). Her approach is different from that of Metzgar, who works from what he sees as ideals formulated by the working class. Despite this concession, she continues her construction of standards for and praise of the texts that fit her rubric, stating, "Each novel offers moments of human kinship, tenderness, commitment, a not-so-quiet spirituality of humble people up against the mighty, unsafe, exploitative job" (44). By continuing in this vein, Zandy discards her previous nod to the potential critical openness of working people to literary texts and closes the loop of definition to include only a very specific kind of text, of which she produces romanticized readings. The texts she analyzes in *Hands* fit her conception of literature that fosters class-consciousness by working to reveal, through documentation, a history of physical injury suffered by manual laborers, as well as by connecting to contemporary issues of workplace hazards and injury. She does this well. However, her project might be just as

⁴ An example of this is the elevating conflict between police, who many argue are working-class, and black people in general, especially in poor and working-class black communities.

effectively carried out without homogenizing the experience of the working class. She fosters a deep and impactful narrative of struggle that is directed toward activism, but again, along the way she forgets the variety of ways in which poor and working people can be damaged and exploited under capitalism—devastation endured by the working class that is not induced by traditional forms of labor.⁵

Zandy is the co-editor, with Nicholas Coles, of the *Anthology of American Working Class Literature*, which includes work from a broad swath of American writers, of multiple identities, writing in various modes and styles, all dealing with the subject of class and labor. Social difference is downplayed, so that, while the anthology includes texts about social Others, their experience of difference is minimized in favor of scenes of the workplace. For example, the anthology includes excerpts from Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, a profoundly intersectional text that conveys the links between class, race, sexuality, and gender. What Zandy and Coles include from the novel are pinpointed segments of the main character's factory jobs and involvement in union activity. They do not include sections that deal with the intersection of class and queer issues. It is likely not the case that the editors intended to exclude work that deals with identity or iterations of economic degradation that are not labor-based. These critical choices and priorities are not in themselves the problem. Rather, the drive to create a rubric for canon formation also acts as a prescription for what working-class people are or should be, imbuing what should be progressive scholarship with normativity that ignores the very real situation of class failure.

⁵ Zandy's work in *Hands* also inspired the list of "General Characteristics of Working-Class Writing and Art; not designed to be criterion but characteristics," put out by Bottom Dog Publishers, which promotes and publishes strictly working-class literature, particularly about Appalachian life. Not meant to be a list of rules, it nonetheless reiterates the limiting view of the working class as a homogenous, singular culture. The first element listed is the expectation that the literature depict its characters in "daily life including their actual, physical work." The fourth item on the list is even more homogenizing, positing that "readers can recognize themselves in the writing." This implies a similar concept to Metzgar's "cultural repertoire" that links working-class people and politics by way of sameness.

In *American Working Class Literature*, Zandy and Coles define working class literature as "by and about America's working people," and about "the ideas and struggles of *ordinary* American people in all their diversity" (emphasis mine). The designation "working-class" historically refers to the people who sell their labor for wages, but has come to refer to both workers and potential workers. The specific privileging of working people in working-class studies ignores the unemployed, unemployable, and those supported by contingent and criminal economies. Likewise, the emphasis on "ordinary" people overtly devalues the non-normative by visualizing a homogenous and undynamic working-class culture. The anthology is singular in its purpose, and hugely valuable to the field of working-class studies. I would not argue to change its core intervention, nor, for the most part, its selections, but I ask the question of where it leads the field, as working-class people of myriad intersectional positionalities continue to write about themselves and their lives within the capitalist economy of the United States.

Other foundational texts by scholars in working-class studies acknowledge the ways in which prior conceptions of the working class have been focused on "white, male, native born workers." In *New Working-Class Studies*, editors Sherri Linkon and John Russo claim to "see class as deeply interwoven with other formative elements of society—race, gender, work, [and] structures of power..." (6). This shows how working-class definitions have expanded to include more kinds of people. However, the categories of inclusion are still limited—probably due to the perceived disciplinary link between working-class studies and labor studies—to diversity within the world of "legitimate" work, even though the volume does deal with unemployment and discrimination in hiring. Because of this, *New Working Class Studies*, Janet Zandy's *Hands* and other books in the field deal with labor struggles and workplace experience (and representations thereof in literature and media), as well as life in the academy, but do not deal directly with

queerness, criminality, or those who have neither access to work nor the normative values and behaviors that working life can entail. Likewise, because the discourse in these studies revolves around normative institutions like work and education (which are inextricably linked to the normative institution of family), it cannot include non-normative positions that by their very nature exist outside these institutions—positions relegated to the fringes of culture and economy, and therefore deeply relevant to class issues and scholarship.

Queer theory, I believe, can help working-class scholars see beyond the lenses of the “almighty job” and heteronormative family dynamics that guide current textual analysis. Exposing the function of normativity as a fantasy also reveals the function and value of refusing these modes of survival and the comfort they bring, because discomfort leaves the problem of oppression and inequity in full view. It might be argued that “failure” in the queer theoretical sense avoids the distraction from our “wretched conditions.” When we use the fantasy structures of family (and therefore of sexual and behavioral norms) that reify capitalism in order to survive, we compromise our potential for revolutionary change. Failing compromises the self and forces one to engage with ugliness and refuse fantasy—to perhaps see more clearly, or at least to disavow capitulation to the pressures of middle-class success. Interweaving working-class studies with queer theory can give scholars in the field a better grasp of the diversity within the working class in the U.S.

On the other hand, queer scholars reading the same texts may not look as deeply at the significance of scenes of work or labor or economic hardship in their effort to destabilize heteronormativity. In queer studies, failure and negativity have been set up, usefully and convincingly, as modes of being that undercut and resist the pull of normative sexuality and gender expression. The most significant theoretical text in this exploration is Judith “Jack”

Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam notes in the introduction to the book that "success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specified forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation" (2). As is the case in both conservative and leftist discourse, this "reproductive maturity," which equates to a traditional understanding of American morality, is associated with ideas about deserving, belonging, and value.

The pressures of capitalist success are familiar to working-class studies scholars, many of whom spend a great deal of time giving credence to representing those who don't meet the ideal. In particular, working-class scholars prize hard-laboring families and communities who don't seek the individualism and Horatio Alger-esque rags-to-riches success that is valorized in the capitalist economy. However, the alternatives most valued in working-class studies are not really utter failure in capitalistic terms, since scholars tend to maintain the conscription to moral uprightness imposed by normative success narratives (which tend not to reflect the criminal reality of most wealth accumulation in the U.S.). Capitalism imposes morality on the working and poverty classes moreso than on the upper classes, and operates as a dividing line to make the morally upright working class feel successful in the face of economic exploitation, and to make moral failures feel and seem unworthy and at fault for their own exploitation. This moral hegemony upholds capitalism and obscures its control. Halberstam suggests that their⁶ work "dismantles the logics of success and failure" of our current moment in capitalism. There are ways that it does; bohemianism and queer anti-success and anti-moralism are significant modes of resistance that derive largely from the position of queerness.

⁶ There are a few people in the course of this dissertation for whom I use the gender-neutral pronoun "they." Judith "Jack" Halberstam has indicated a lack of concern for which gender pronoun is used to describe them, but I choose the neutral as a matter of investment in breaking down the binary.

To perceive failure as an important part of the working-class experience may seem like a capitulation to the forces of bigotry that guide the distinctions of inside/outside, success/failure, and good/bad paradigms, because it appears to legitimate constructions of the working class as inferior, and to accept as natural the social stratification that creates inequality. To embrace failure, many might argue, reifies social divisions, and concretizes the categories of class, by arguing that conservatives were right all along in the belief that queer and poor people are intrinsically unworthy. However, valuing and examining queer failure can reveal the bourgeois nature of ideas about worthiness, as well as discover ways of resisting capital by exploding norms of being and of resistance. Failure is a helpful model for understanding the working class more broadly, by dispossessing normativity in favor of lived lives.

However, Halberstam's position is incomplete without a serious consideration of class. Halberstam makes their most convincing case for failure as a politic act when they states:

Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon "trying and trying again." (3, emphasis mine)

It is supremely important that Halberstam presents the political significance of failure as something contingent—this connotes a converse position that "under certain circumstances" failure might also not be so queerly inviting and opening.

Halberstam's conception of failure shifts its focus away from class, however, shortly after this point. They writes, "failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods" (3). In this formulation, Halberstam's "us" reads as class privilege—it is evidently a middle-class or at least a stable working-class "us," which predicts the possibility of an orderly and predictable adulthood that can consciously eschewed. Halberstam no doubt cares about working-class and poverty issues and the people they affect, but nevertheless writes from a naturalized morality and stable class position. Those who can't help but fail in more than merely queer ways are not escaping norms by doing so—there is grave punishment for people whose classed failure is not a consciously chosen way of life or countercultural style cultivated by queer sensibility. There is no camp joy to be derived from the scourge of the urban black AIDS crisis, nor from the pandemic of methamphetamine addiction.

Many of the people I am concerned about being erased from working-class studies can be likened to the "lumpenproletariat," a Marxist term that means "ragged proletariat." The word was originally Marx's categorization of people he perceived as parasitic in relation to the proletariat. Lumpen people were "the dangerous class, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the oldest layers of old society" (Darity, Jr.). They are "people who subsist on the margins of society and scavenge a living from illegal or semi-illegal activities, such as prostitution of petty thieving, and the underworld involved therein" (Darity, Jr.). These people constituted the very poor and desperate who were not able to or refused to work in traditional labor jobs. They were thought of as relatively equal to the bourgeoisie in their exploitation of the proletariat. Later, Marx developed a more sympathetic view of lumpen people (Hemmerle). Though no longer villainized as counter-revolutionary in Marx's theories of capitalism, people

who resemble this historical group in the present day are still thought of as social parasites, even by people on the left.

Queer negativity, like its somewhat friendlier counterpart, queer failure, has the potential to contribute to class analysis and critique as well, but scholars in queer studies betray a myopia in ignoring class. A foundational work posing queer negativity as resistive is Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman's proposition pertains to resisting reproductive futurism and all that it entails ideologically: reproductive time, modes of success, types of relationships that matter most or count at all. He defines what he calls the "cult of the Child," which drives all political discourse, regardless of party or affiliation to a social order (19).⁷ He describes the image of the "Child [that] remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (3). In this vision, the image of the child, which Edelman takes care to explain is "not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children," is the symbol used to justify political agendas of all types (11). The child is certainly a ubiquitous symbol of the ideological structures of capitalism, though it is not the only one. Edelman writes:

[T]hat figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation's good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights 'real' citizens are allowed. For the social order exists to preserve for this

⁷ Edelman defines reproductive futurism as the impetus of politics to "affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child" (3). In other words, our social structure looks perpetually forward to the future and its children, and that the need to secure that future is the engine of heteronormativity. Reproductive time is defined by Judith "Jack" Halberstam in the book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* as the orderly use of and delegation of time based on the "middle-class logic" of adulthood, maturity, and longevity (4). Conversely, what Halberstam calls queer time, which comes first from gay men's sense of the diminishing future because of the AIDS crisis—a crisis that put emphasis on the now. Queer time is also "about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (2).

universalized subject, this fantasmatic Child, a notional freedom itself, which might, after all, put at risk the Child to whom such a freedom falls due. (11)

In the current political structure, the figure of the Child stands in the way of rights and liberties of real living people—economic inequality is smoothed over by the plea for moral normativity made through the sweet Gerber-baby face of the future. Racism, homophobia, sexism, incarcerationism, and war are likewise packed into the fantasy diaper bag of the future child. The Child of the future is the alibi for not fighting oppression in the present.

Recognizing and rejecting the symbology of the future child can be valuable for working-class scholarship. It can de-emphasize the moralism embedded in it, by revealing how moral categories are motivated, at least in part, by reproductive futurism, because of imagined future danger to the Child. Likewise, an understanding of futurism's hold on laboring time might reduce the more capitalism-reifying value in worker dignity and respectability. The image of the child on the future horizon, one might say, keeps real present-time adult and children's stomachs empty; social programs, classrooms, and hospitals underfunded and undervalued; and wages low.

Edelman also argues, however, that reproductive futurity and the "cult of the Child" are used to shape *all* politics, even progressive and anti-capitalist politics:

For politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate a social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantastic beneficiary of every political intervention. (3)

Here, Edelman points out a significant flaw in political projects across the board—that the futurity inherent in all politics perpetually holds actual social change at a distance—deferred for the next generation—hence the terms of so many political projects dedicated to “our children and grandchildren.”⁸ Edelman’s critique of politics as complicit with reproductive futurity is bold, but it isn’t anti-political, as he suggests. Edelman would likely not be concerned with a revolutionary politics or a unified working-class consciousness. Edelman’s proposition is exciting—an epiphany. The fantasmatic Child of the future is ubiquitous and tyrannical. But Edelman’s vision is too narrow; he fails to examine the cultural specificity of the image of this fantasmatic Child is that guides capitalistic values, especially in the U.S. That is, the image of the Child of the future, at least in the contemporary U.S. is a smiling, healthy, gender-normative, middle or upper-class white child.

A version of queer negativity that is decidedly concerned with capitalism and class is that of Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism*. Berlant reflects on how certain forms of optimism and positive thinking are damaging. Berlant defines cruel optimism as “when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving” (2). Capitalism and its ideologies provide infinite potential sources for attachment in terms of those imagined possibilities that hinder life. The attachments that catalyze cruel optimism are fantasies masquerading as real futures. In this way, Berlant’s theoretical framework is adjacent to Edelman’s ideas about abandoning futurity, asserting similarly that objects that persist on the horizon veil and make impossible life in the present.

⁸ Of course, children and grandchildren matter, when they exist; however, the terms are nearly always regarding hypothetical future generations, rather than the humans, adults included, who experience wild injustice in the face of these hypotheticals, or because their lives supposedly threaten the lives of these hypothetical future generations.

Berlant writes, “[T]he fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy. The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment” (3). In addition to perceiving the class element of this cruel optimism, Berlant’s effort to instrumentalize an alternative model to this way of thinking and being also incorporates class sensibility. She composes her analysis around texts across media that “track[] the emergence of a precarious public sphere, an intimate public of subjects who circulate scenarios of economic and intimate contingency and trade paradigms for how best to live on, considering” (3). Berlant resists forms of trauma theory that connect traumas only to exceptional events or circumstances. Instead, she examines the traumatic in the everyday—the persistence of life through conditions that for many might seem untenable.

Occasionally, Berlant’s way of describing this “living on” despite the pains of living might read like defeatism. Berlant goes on to write, “Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (2). Here, working-class scholars continuously return to the “scene of fantasy,” which is the promise of happiness or fulfillment of a normative life. It’s a fantasy of comfort or safety (not an altogether bad thing to desire) within class struggle. Ultimately, though, she writes from a Marxist, class-conscious position, which poses alternatives to the dream of class ascension sold through the concept of

meritocracy, and which attempts to dismantle the particularly U.S. American belief that we are “temporarily embarrassed millionaires.”⁹

The trauma and tragedy of my subjects, however—the failures and abjections of the working class in the texts that I read—are illuminated in important ways through the lens of her work. Her subjects exist in a present of making do and enduring. In fact, for Berlant, the act of hoping itself becomes the goal. To be optimistic about a better life is the end point, rather than the actual betterment of one’s life and circumstances. Some may possess a dream of the future as better, but class and identity positions suppress not only upward mobility, but also survival. Stable working-class people may also be exploited and ill-treated by bosses, unfair juridical processes, and media and political representations, but those dangers are greater for those who are not stable. It is the unstable working-class and poor for whom optimism is the most cruel.

Like Berlant, Heather Love argues in *Feeling Backward* for the importance of looking at histories of queer suffering without the impulse to “turn these representations to good use” (4). She, like Edelman, does not focus on class specifically, but her theoretical framework has strong potential for class critique. Love shows that by letting the negativity of a text sit still and be, more of the “truth” of the text’s present comes forward. She continues: “texts that insist on social negativity underline the gap between aspiration and the actual. At odds with the wishful thinking that characterizes political criticism, they are held accountable for the realities that they represent and often end up being branded as internally homophobic, retrograde, or too depressing to be of use.” Further, she suggests that these texts “describe what it is like to bear a ‘disqualified’ identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury—not fixing it” (4). This proposal may look a bit counter-revolutionary as well, since it asks exploitation to stand still to be

⁹ The statement that socialism never gained traction in the U.S. because our poor don’t see themselves as a class, but as “temporarily embarrassed millionaires” is credited to author John Steinbeck.

examined. It does not, however, ask the exploited to live inside a fantasy of a better future where they are respected for their labor and productive role in the economy. What this perspective can add to working-class studies is a breakdown of the fantasy of a singular working-class culture that must be protected. That protective impulse insists on the status quo—a dream of dignity for workers within the system, not outside of it.

The texts that I choose in this dissertation are either overtly presenting or imbued with elements of social negativity, on queer terms and class terms. In each chapter, I locate and analyze various modes of negativity and failure by people in queer positions, some who have same-sex desire and some who occupy other queer positions in the social order. The histories of queer suffering that Heather Love wants to observe for what they are in the texts she analyzes from the modernist period are not the last of their kind. The “backward turn” that she discusses and values examines the darkness of the past, and looks away from the future. However, we need not look backward to see plenty of social negativity and suffering in texts of the recent past and of the present. The texts I look at in this dissertation were produced during and after the Reagan era that cultivated the ubiquitous moralism inherent in views of the working class. These texts are laden with issues of poverty and class suffering that are difficult to perceive fully from a moralistic standpoint, but can be opened up through the incorporation of queer theory into class analysis.

The texts I look at in this work are, for the most part, ostensibly realist texts (documentary and “reality television” included), from a range of popular media and literature. I have chosen works that were created during or after the Reagan Administration and the cultural shift to more conservative moralist codes, which influence the right and the left by veiling themselves as common sense and apolitical. I choose texts from popular culture—film,

television, literature— because I believe that these both reflect and impact mainstream moralism more than lesser known, more obscure texts. Relatedly, I choose these texts because I enjoy them, and I find examination of them to be strongly indicative of the need for the joining of working-class studies to queer theory.

In the first chapter, my emphasis is on the more traditional sense of queer—that is, I look at texts that pertain to lower-class circumstances of people with same-sex desire and gender-transgressive people. The main purpose is to show the deep significance of what are generally considered purely queer texts by scholars in both disciplines I draw from. In looking at the canonical 1990 documentary film about drag ball culture in 1980s Harlem, *Paris is Burning*, by Jennie Livingston, I unpack the interconnectedness of work, class, and queerness, to explain how working-class issues pertain to people who are far from the “ordinary” people that working-class scholars privilege in much of their work.

I examine scenes of the balls, and the way in which the queens’ performances are simultaneously gender performances and class performances. Drawing on Lee Edelman’s embrace of queer negativity, I look at how the film deals with the class experience of queer black people in Harlem in the 1980s and consider both its revolutionary queer potential and its class tragedy. Although I find Halberstam’s analysis of failure valuable, I curtail the impulse to frame *Paris is Burning* as a celebratory document of queer failure. I employ queer historian Julian Carter’s tracing of physical and social norms to discuss the capitalist, middle-class nature of the ideals these queens fail to live up to. Likewise, I examine early critiques of the film to shore up my reading of the film as both a queer and a working-class text.

To contrast media portraying similar social groups in the mainstream media, I bring *RuPaul’s Drag Race* into the chapter to discuss how its mainstream appeal stems from its erasure of

class from the scene of queerness. I point out some moments in the show in which queer poverty and class issues nevertheless appear in glimpses. Lastly, I present and analyze photography by queer Pittsburgh artist Caldwell Linker. Linker's book *All Through the Night*, which depicts queer night life in the working-class city of Pittsburgh. In general, this reading guides an understanding of what queer/class elements, read through queer failure, have resistive potential—a way of underlining specific social scene or scenario in which queer failure has the most resistive potential, balanced over trauma or erasure. Linker's collection highlights elements of queer working-class society being both things in open and expressive ways. There are some somber moments, such as when class and queerness come into focus as trauma: a trans man in a hospital bed, a queen's bruised face from a homophobic attack. The chapter captures these moments in queer representation in order to connect the ideas of queer failure and working-class queer life. I start with the more traditional notion of queerness here, so that I can elaborate on theories of failure and negativity in other modes of queerness that are not couched in sexuality or gender.

In my second chapter, the queer position is held by the non-white, non-U.S.-citizens as well as drug addicts and low-level drug criminals exploited by the character of Walter White in the television drama *Breaking Bad*. This chapter argues in part that moral and behavioral distinctions that working class scholars tend to impose make it very difficult to perceive how capitalism is mirrored on the other side of the law. I argue that the reading of Walter White as a working-class hero who is exploited in his job as a high school chemistry teacher and is forced into crime to pay for medical bill is wrong. Instead, his normative position as a white, heterosexual, would-be upper-class male makes his position as a high capitalist in an illegal enterprise hard to see. He exploits illegal workers of color, of queer sexual positionalities, and of

morally debased circumstances such as sex-workers and addicts. I thoroughly unpack and analyze the pilot episode of the series to show Walter's personal crisis as a deposed capitalist who re-emerges in the illicit drug trade. I discuss histories of white masculinity in the U.S. and its relation to capital, as well as criminality. Additionally, I use look at theory on the relationship of anxiety and surveillance to consider why working-class studies scholars are so reticent about acknowledging crime and drug use as working-class cultures. Finally, I look at scholarship on lumpen abuse, which deals with indigent people and drug addicts and their experience trying to survive. Later in the chapter, I use HBO's *The Wire* to compare how racial and economic backgrounds affect the possibility of class transcendence. The significance of intersectionality here is in revealing how a moralizing, normative approach to the working class and poor obscures a great deal about the social workings of capitalism.

The third and final chapter of this work is dedicated to failure in the form of abjection. Abjection and themes of the abject have been buzzwords in recent queer studies, along with failure and negativity. Looking at three novels, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, and *Push*, by Sapphire, I examine how abjection in each work is classed and intersectional (of course, intersectionality includes class). Using psychoanalytic perspectives on abjection, starting with the critical touchstone on abjection, Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, I discuss those who have no choice about their proximity to and position in the abject. Chute's and Allison's works differ from Sapphire's in the way the characters live with and near to the material conditions of the abject, as well as to moral abjection. Allison and Chute's characters relate to and use abjection to forge class identity and to fortify themselves against abuse—both sexual and economic.

Working-class and Marxist scholars queer the hard-livers of the working class without recognizing the strength of the hard-livers' challenge to normativity. As queers are held up against hetero- *and* homo-normativity as both abject and deeply resistant to the expectation of reproductivity, so the unruly, perverse, and even violent members of the working class occupy a position that resists dominant morality, sometimes by being specifically anti-productive and therefore anathema to capitalist production. More than this, however, a willingness to recognize creeps, perverts, and jerks as they are provides a better picture of what is going on, structurally, in contemporary capitalism.

Chapter One

The Working Class in Drag: The Economics of Queer Failure

Because most people are working-class, most queer people are working-class. Conversely, because sexual normativity is formed from middle-class values, there is an intrinsically queer character to being working-class. Because this project is concerned with the abiding moralism in working-class studies, it is important that contemporary culture is saturated with discourse around sexual morality. Moralism about sex and sexuality often overshadow other concerns. In the 1980s, invigorated attention to homosexuality was born out of the emerging AIDS crisis. The moral judgment attached to AIDS as “the gay plague” was indicated by President Ronald Reagan’s refusal to publicly acknowledge the disease until May 31, 1987 (White). Part and parcel of the cultural politics of Reagan’s presidency was the “Moral Majority,”¹⁰ which presumed the existence of a singular American morality. This American moral homogeneity, which persists today, is marriage-and-work-oriented, reproductively heterosexual, and is represented in media as mostly white and middle-class. Anti-AIDS fears pertain specifically to the sexual and racial identities of the population most at risk for the disease. AIDS impacted then, and continues to impact today, the poor, black, and gay male communities primarily. Impoverished people of color, homosexual men and women, and transgender people are treated as second and third-class citizens and are considered within

¹⁰ The Moral Majority, a political lobbying group, was formed in 1979 by Televangelist Jerry Falwell, and was credited with delivering the 1980 election to Ronald Reagan.

conservative moral thinking as at fault for their own circumstances because they are immoral.¹¹

The fatal disease impacting poor black people and gays matters only insofar as it affects mainstream, white, middle-class culture.¹² Keyed to this imaginary mainstream, representations of the working-class as white, male, and heterosexual keep working-class studies moving along the Tennessee Williams-Bruce Springsteen continuum—a way of thinking about working-class politics that allows a notorious racist and sexist hip-hop artist like Eminem to be a part of the working-class canon, but not Ru Paul or Divine.¹³ It allows filmmakers like Clint Eastwood to be perceived as mouthpieces for a working-class culture through their films, but not John Waters.¹⁴

As has often been noted, one of the greatest accomplishments of the Reagan Era was the shift of the political center to the right (Troy 2). This shift has persisted since the Reagan presidency, and moralism has been its central node. Because morality is understood as apolitical and “natural,” it veils economic motivations that benefit the wealthy and harm the poor and working class. The importance of work—the belief in the ultimate payoff of hard work even if that payoff is in more abstract terms than monetary gain, such as “self-respect,” and “dignity”—is posed as common sense, rather than motivated by capital. Sexual morality in the forms of monogamy and reproductivity is also considered common sense, insisted upon as a natural element of human evolution, rather than a construct that serves capital by containing collectivity within nuclear families rather than communities, and by repressing women’s choices. As a

¹¹ This point of view was fervently proliferated in the media by influential conservative political commentators and televangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, among others.

¹² There’s a reason 13-year-old Ryan White became the face of HIV and AIDS in the 1980s. It is not because he was among the first children affected by the disease—he wasn’t—it is because he was a white, middle-class child, and therefore perceived as morally pure. To the mainstream, White was unfairly condemned to death because of someone else’s sexual activities.

¹³ Eminem’s “Lose Yourself” appears in the poetry and song lyrics anthology *Working Words: Punching the Clock and Kicking Out the Jams*. His working-class upbringing in Detroit places him squarely within the framework of working-class cultural studies.

¹⁴ John Waters is a film auteur who rose to subcultural fame by depicting the exploits of immoral and tasteless people. For example, his 1972 film, *Pink Flamingos* depicts two families vying for the title of “filthiest people alive.”

society, we have adopted more progressive attitudes about partner choice, i.e. interracial and same-sex marriage, in spite of some violent opposition to both, but the general structure of what is desirable, appropriate, or morally upright remains mostly unchanged: monogamy, family, law-abiding, and stability. This marriage and family structure is ensconced in a highly racialized and class-inflected history.

Since its inception, working-class studies as a field has worked to counter conservative economic beliefs furthered by Reaganomics—in particular, the strangulation and disempowerment of labor unions as a source of protection for workers, and the “trickle-down theory” of economics that lowered taxes for the wealthy and that deregulated Wall Street. Areas of focus for scholars have been labor and union history, as well as present-day union activity, analyzing texts about the workplace, and looking closely at the relationship of ethnic enclaves in the U.S. to work and the economy. Additionally, working-class studies has worked to decenter the prevailing focus on “high culture” and the media fixation on lifestyles of the wealthy, in order to show the beauty in the modest lives of certain working-class people. However, scholars in the discipline remain blind to the conservatism that prevails and, in general, work right along with the moralistic divisions set by the conservative agenda. This is not to suggest that these scholars are clandestine Reaganists. Rather, the political arc toward conservatism has been thoroughly successful in controlling moral discourse, even on the left. The claim that Reaganist moral discourse informs working-class studies based on the shared historical moment may appear circumstantial—moral discourse on the left has been conservative in nature in other, prior historical moments¹⁵—but the power of Reagan doctrine signals the invisibility of moral

¹⁵ In the 1930s, the proletarian movement posed a number of white heteromasculinist criteria for what working-class literature was, famously laid out by Mike Gold in his manifesto “Go Left, Young Writer,” published in *The New Masses* in 1929. Granville Hicks, a literary critic in this movement, also conveyed a staunch moralism in the role of the working-class, romanticizing the working-class as innately moral, in opposition to the capitalist class.

“common sense,” which has been undeniable in the realm of media and politics. Additionally, because working-class studies is engendered entirely by the subject and history of work as both a mode of subsistence within a capitalist (and Marxist!) structure and a laden cultural milieu, workers become the most valuable textual material for scholars in the field.

Because production in a Marxist sense is so wrapped up in concepts of reproduction, definitions of what constitutes a worker are imbued with marriage and family discourse. These marriages and families can be fraught and difficult, so long as they are hetero and gender normative. Workers are sons, daughters, mothers, and especially fathers, as much as they are workers; they are workers because of their family affiliations. The connection made between family and reproductive futurity and economic justice in working-class studies leaves the non-normative in terms of “legitimate” work and family by the wayside in constituting what is understood as a working-class text. Again, certain kinds of people are excluded from consideration as working class, reifying an understanding of who is worthy of attention, study, and justice in highly familiar terms: white and heterosexual. These are the “deserving poor” of Reaganist doctrine. Definitely not included are impoverished black and latino, gay and transgender people, whose collectivity revolves around drag balls in which these people perform upper-class heteronormative whiteness for one another.

In this dissertation, I resist the exclusionary moralism of the left. As an active and participating member of the Working-Class Studies Association (WCSA), I’ve been disappointed by the minimal and segregated discussions of GLBT and queer communities in our conferences and published works, as well as the ways that conversations about class and race intersectionality in the field do little more than smooth the edges of cultural differences, to make the argument that “we’re all the same” under the umbrella of class. The work of the WCSA in

creating dialogue across disciplines about the oft-ignored subject of class can be so powerful, but it is weakened by its myopia with regard to queerness.

Contrary to the common Marxist and class-centered argument, economic injustice does not transcend identity categories. As Michael Zweig explains, the majority of the nation's working-class are white—a statistical point that can be connected to the fact that white Americans are still the statistical majority of the population.¹⁶ But white Americans who are poor or working-class are not so as a result of their whiteness, and though economic hardship for whites is dire, whiteness is an asset for class ascension (which is still not easy or likely, especially during our current economic depression). Conversely, racial difference and non-normative sexuality and gender expression still directly impact a person's ability to gain employment and housing. This is especially acute for queer people of color and GLBT people who are not moving on life trajectories toward monogamy, reproduction, and child-rearing.

The 1990s moved toward inclusiveness, but within the established moral framework. GLBT activism of this period was chiefly about destroying the demonization of homosexuality that was inflamed by the AIDS crisis that emerged in the 1980s, and dealt in rhetorics of sameness and normalcy for gays and lesbians, even at the risk of capitulating to the chauvinism of the mainstream. Numerous state referenda were put forth by conservative Christian organizations during this decade, designed to deny GLBT people recourse from employment, housing, and juridical discrimination. These debates continue, but are now centered on the issue of gay marriage. The “Gay 90s” took place primarily in the milieu of film and television, with the expansion of mainstream GLBT-oriented movie production, and gay-centered reality television shows like the wildly classist *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, as well as “very special” episodes of prime time television dramas and sitcoms, which featured a coming out or a single

¹⁶ <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb12-243.html>

same-sex kiss between a main character and a guest character (*Roseanne*, *Party of Five*, *Picket Fences*, and numerous others). Likewise, the 1990s brought about the on-screen coming out of Ellen DeGeneres's character on the *Ellen* sitcom. The impact of this media era on social discourse around sexual morality was tremendous.¹⁷ However, the period mostly served gay and lesbian people who were white, middle-class-to-wealthy, property-motivated, and marriage and nuclear family-driven. Mainstream gay media sites from that time forward have reassured straight audiences that gays and lesbians will not disrupt the social order. As a result, the otherwise-normative white gay and lesbian community, by and large, experienced a great deal of liberation by way of the visibility afforded them.

However, the view of the GLBT community afforded by mainstream media since the 1990s is deficient. Defining the working class based on behavior and lifestyle makes the term working-class a social identity, rather than an economic relationship to production, pushing poor and working-class GLBT and queer people further to the fringes. Even though working-class studies scholars resist the ideals of middle and upper-class life, they don't shake the moral norms attached to these positions.

Since the 1990s focus on creating positive visibility for gays in the face of AIDS, many queer theorists have recognized and worked to counter the conciliatory politics rooted in the urgent effort to prove that GLBT people were worthy of saving (reasons to spend tax money on AIDS research and treatment), along with the associated efforts to create an image of gays as "just like everyone else," a characterization that takes on racial and class-based dimensions. Queer theory shirks the politics of inclusion that valorizes the status quo. The problem many queer theorists locate in this discourse is the creation of dividing lines through the GLBT

¹⁷ The 90s also gave rise to the phenomenon of New Queer Cinema, which counters mainstream and homonormative representations of queer people.

community, which, just as in mainstream American society, run along moralistic lines. Queer theorists like Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam, Jose Muñoz, and Lauren Berlant, among others, embed queer critiques in anti-capitalist politics. Contemporary queer theories of failure make an even more pointed evaluation of class as it intersects with queer identity, though they occasionally fall back into simplistic aesthetic analyses of sartorial play and performance.

There is a strong connection between queer and class failure in the urban queer black communities of the 1980s, such as the one portrayed in the documentary film, *Paris is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston and released in 1990. This film has been critiqued and commented upon by scholars so much since its release that it may seem superfluous to conduct a detailed analysis here. Nonetheless, the exclusion of queer and gender transgressive lives from working-class cultures makes discussion pertinent. This film is especially compelling because of its temporal setting in the 1980s—the height of Reaganist moralism as well as the founding of working-class studies as a discipline.

The working-and-poverty-class black and latino men and transgender women portrayed in the film are of the lowest possible register in terms of Reaganism's exclusions: black, poor, queer, and conforming neither to norms of gender nor of family. They are embodiments of the fictitious "Welfare Queen," without even the decency to be straight. Since the "Welfare Queen" is a racist invention, the actual relationship of the queens in *Paris is Burning* to welfare is irrelevant. These people are queer failures in both resistive and tragic ways. As gay men and transgender women, they fail to be reproductive heterosexuals; they appear to live in a community almost entirely devoid of cis-gender women.¹⁸ Additionally, since they are people of color, both middle-class and established working-class norms are out of their reach. They fail in

¹⁸ "Cisgender is a term used to describe people who, for the most part, identify as the gender they were assigned at birth" (<http://www.basicrights.org/uncategorized/trans-101-cisgender/>).

economic terms because they are working-and-poverty-class people, living hand-to-mouth for subsistence, and often using illegal means to make a living. The film illustrates these failures through interviews with a few main queens: Pepper La Beija, Dorian Corey, Octavia St. Laurent, and Venus Xtravaganza. The community represented in the film, and the ball culture they create and reinvent, exemplifies failure in politically significant, if not always consciously oppositional ways. Though I discuss the ways normativity excludes these people, I am not concerned with simply rewriting the norms to include them. Rather, my purpose is to avoid translating class into a culture or a moralist stance, be it Moynihan's "culture of poverty" or Metzgar's "cultural repertoire" of the working class. Black and Latino queens in Harlem are distinct from the primarily white working-class union activists of the past and present, and should not be made invisible by simple subsumption under the heading of the working class. I hope to convincingly explain why turning class into a cultural category is harmful by showing how the most vulnerable are further obliterated by the moralism innate in the present cultural distinctions.

The importance of *Paris is Burning* to working-class studies is not that it reveals or celebrates reclaimed power for its subjects, but that the film and the phenomena surrounding its making show the tremendous economic vulnerability of the participants. Viewers witness some of what the queens do to fight against their susceptibility to social trauma. This is manifested in the spectacular failure of the ball scene. My goal is not necessarily to rescue the film from criticism, although I enjoy the film and find it invaluable as one of the few documentations of 1980s drag culture, and perhaps the only one specifically documenting black and Latino drag performers. What I most want to point out is how the film, its critical reception, and the associated juridical life of the participants in the film's making are relevant to working-class

studies. I also use the film to denote how important queerness and failure are to understanding class.

Reaganism's racial and sexual norms, famously part of a conspiratorial moral and political shift to the right, represented the pinnacle of a historical escalation of morally-driven norm-formation throughout the 20th century. In some cases, too many, as I have argued before, working-class studies scholars have done the work of normalizing heterosexual whiteness, creating and reiterating these identitarian modes as the locale of working-classness. Scholars too often use various synonyms of "normal" as interchangeable with "working-class." Using the two terms interchangeably may work to depose upper-class people from their position as arbiters of culture, but replaces them with another heterosexual, white norm, which becomes a class ascendance narrative-in-waiting. Replacing one moral norm with another does not disrupt class structure, and it has the potential (already partly realized) of creating further economic divides between the lower classes and the upper class. Queer failure, then, works to sidestep this process of norming. The failure to satisfy the norms of the white hetero bourgeoisie or working class creates a new model for existence, which can exhibit beautiful anti-capitalist potential. But it can also place people at risk of trauma, pain, and death.

The people and community portrayed in *Paris is Burning* also fail in the most tragic way, by dying. One major flaw in the film is its nearly complete skirting of the subject of HIV and AIDS, as well as the drug epidemic that is endemic in poor communities all over the U.S. Nevertheless, the specter of these ailments looms over the film, and in the years after it was made, a number of the people interviewed and portrayed in the film had contracted or died from AIDS-related illnesses. They include Willi Ninja, whose masterful "vogue" dancing in the film and whose other higher profile performances in the 1980s triggered a movement that was

brutally co-opted by Madonna in the video for her pop song “Vogue.”¹⁹ Queer scholar Philip Brian Harper argues that the film serves Livingston’s self-construction more than that of the queens—that is, she gains cultural authority and cultural (and actual) capital, while the queens gain nothing. While he may be right that the drag personae they take on at the balls are more self-created than the “private persons” of their interviews, he’s wrong in the claim that these personae “do not constitute substantive interventions in the governing social order” (102).

The working and poverty-class setting of the film is evident from the outset as the film begins with a shot of gay men on the street in New York City, under flickering street lights in Harlem, clearly not an affluent area at the time of the filming.²⁰ The queens are laughing and joking casually; the film then cuts to a scene inside a ballroom, focused on queen Pepper La Beija “walking” in a wildly stylized homemade gold lamé ball gown, in front of a crowd of chanting and cheering queens who goad her on.²¹ Pepper La Beija, the “mother” of the house of La Beija, is essentially the first interviewee in the film, and the interview occurs inside La Beija’s cramped apartment.²² The space is dark, lit by one lamp. La Beija is surrounded by younger queens who hang on his words as he explains the ball scene and his role in it.²³ It’s clear that the apartment is very small and spare, and while LaBeija’s clothes are stylish and bold, they also appear worn and threadbare. This echoes the thrifted and DIY nature of this queer scene. La

¹⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/18/style/paris-has-burned.html>, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/06/arts/dance/06ninja.html?_r=0 Willi Ninja died of AIDS-related heart trouble in 2006.

²⁰ Harlem has undergone some revitalization (read: gentrification) since the making of the film.

²¹ To “walk” in a ball is to present oneself as a competitor in the ball, and to perform a drag persona among other queens. Mimics, and expands upon the phenomenon of a fashion model’s runway walk.

²² Drag communities are often structured like families, with a mother, sometimes a father, and younger “children,” who are younger members of the drag scene looking for guidance and nurturing from an understanding source.

²³ In the film, LaBeija is careful to explain that he does not identify as a woman, as many of the other queens do.

Beija also has seriously visibly deteriorated teeth. The long-term effects of working-class life often manifests in deteriorating physical health, frequently most visible in dental health.²⁴

Class looms over the narratives of every person interviewed as they discuss their perspectives on the city, the balls, and everyday survival. There is a pervading sense of injustice and inequality as both the younger and older queens discuss their access to both basic goods (food, clothing, shelter) and more abstract privileges like “happiness,” “normality,” and the much more complicated concept of “fame.” Of the young people who are just coming out and entering into the drag scene and gay culture in New York City, La Beija states, “A lot of those kids who come to balls don’t have two of nothing.” This indicates the desperate, exiguous living of most of the queens, especially the younger ones, who are drawn to the ball scene. Most of these young people haven’t got much more than what they are wearing when they find their way into the ball scene, to be taken under the wings of older queens. La Beija further and poignantly states, “Some of them don’t even eat. They come to balls starving. They’re under 21... They sleep on the pier. They don’t have a home to go to. But they’ll go out and steal something and get dressed up and come to a ball for that one night.”

This is a complicated point of view in terms of class scholarship, because the left has so often derided “fashion” and “glamour” as bourgeois, capitalist endeavors. Likewise, theft is still often perceived as a parasitic appropriation of others’ labor. Most working-class scholarship resists discussion of illegal activity, on the basis that there is already a false perception of the working class as on the whole criminal and parasitic. There is not much in-depth focus on sex work, the drug trade, or any other kind of illegal mode of subsistence shared at working-class

²⁴ A significant amount of research is available on class divisions in dental health in the U.K., whereas in U.S. research, dental health seems to be lumped in with research on overall health inequality. Nevertheless, dental condition is a large part of how we read others’ class, as evidenced by pervasive media representations of the poor as toothless.

studies conferences. It is not part of this analysis to argue for these occupations as valid work (I deal with this more directly in chapter 2), only to acknowledge them as part of the capitalist economic structure.

In *Paris is Burning*, the ball scene hinges on a reverse co-optation²⁵ of fashion and glamour culture that is a survival tactic as well as the epicenter for a kind of collective consciousness revolving around race, class, and sexuality. Likewise, with regard to himself, La Beija explains, “I’ve never felt comfortable being poor... I’ve always felt cheated...I’d always see the way that rich people lived...and it was like a slap in the face. Why is it that they could have it and I didn’t [sic].” Even though this statement doesn’t necessarily convey the wisdom of collective consciousness, it positions the film in terms of class, and it indicates the class resistance within the drag performances of the ball scene. Having felt cheated by poverty, La Beija turned to the ball scene as a form of resistance to the injustice of having nothing and struggling to live. Because the queens cannot access comfort, success, or respectability, they form their own standards of success and respectability, and find comfort in one another and the communities they create.

The collective element of the drag culture portrayed in *Paris is Burning* is complicated. Drag balls are portrayed in the film as a gay version of sports and other forms of masculine violence. Balls are a community-building gathering for marginalized people, but at the same time, the balls are highly competitive and can be divisive. For instance, several queens in the film discuss how the balls stand in for sports in inner-city gay culture. Early on, a young man explains: “Society, they flip going to a football game or a basketball game. That’s their entertainment. A ball is ours.” Here, he points out a difference in taste and spectatorship, but it

²⁵ That is, critical understanding of co-optation is usually of the dominant culture co-opting the culture of the oppressed in order to further exercise its power. In this case, the oppressed co-opt the dominant culture to critique and diminish its power.

applies as well to participation. Football and basketball in particular are very much correlated with working-class young men, often of color. That this young man points to athletic endeavors as “society’s” entertainment suggests his resignation to outsider status. It also hints that he perceives himself, as a queen, to be removed from working-class society.

Despite the fact that sports leagues at the college and professional levels are highly profitable capitalistic enterprises, and despite the commentary on the exploitation of poor black men (and women) in college sports, athletics are correlated with working class culture.

Organized sports produce a complicated dialectical relationship between poor black athletes and the sports they play, in terms of the creation of class-consciousness and opportunities for education and class ascendancy.²⁶ Athletics, even amid urban poverty, constitute a standard element of working-class living in most areas of the United States. Competition provides the opportunity for a kind of dominance and power over the self and the world that the majority of poor athletes do not experience once off the field or court, unless they become successful professional athletes in high profile sports. What sports are not, generally speaking, is gay or queer friendly: anti-gay violence and hyper-masculinist attitudes are a part of sports culture.

In drag, the competition is channeled differently. Athletic competition provides a sense of power and agency through the simulation of conquering and warfare. Drag competition is more than just a simulation. Sports victories allow athletes to imagine opportunity beyond the field; drag understands and depends upon its limitations, which have to do with both class and queerness. The competition is primarily about prowess on an aesthetic level. It is not about reinscribing the oppressive master/servant dichotomy through its physically violent forms of enacting domination, but instead reveals the superficiality of class by recreating upper-class

²⁶ For more on this subject, see *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle*, by Michael Oriard, and “How Can One Be a Sports Fan?” by Pierre Bourdieu.

aesthetics in a place where they do not commonly appear, and showing them as superficial—costumes.

Octavia St. Laurent, a drag queen featured in *Paris is Burning*, seeks a full gender transition and a modeling career. She knows she is on an impossible uphill climb, and the film indicates the marginalization she experiences in the modeling profession. The film makes it fairly clear that, despite her evident feminine beauty and her energetic attempts to get her foot in the door, modeling is not a likely reality. St. Laurent explains, “If money wasn’t so important in the world today, to survive, I guess I wouldn’t want anything but what I have now.” Here, she shows that her ambitions are primarily about survival.

Octavia St. Laurent passes as a woman, and she appears in a photo shoot posing in a yellow bikini, looking very much like a professional model. She further relates, “I don’t think the world has been fair to me. Not yet, anyway.” Again, this stance doesn’t necessarily reflect a complete class-consciousness, since it suggests an individual injustice, rather than a collective one. However, St. Laurent is conscious of injustice and is very aware of the manner in which her race, gender, and sexuality impact her economic standing. Her hope to overcome that injustice through modeling is not an indication of her submission to injustice or inequality. The film does not convey any naïveté about St. Laurent’s obstacles. When St. Laurent attends the “Supermodel of the World” contest, we see her drifting around a roomful of hopeful women, alone, and seemingly directionless. We learn that 75,000 women compete in this contest. This statistic, coupled with the film’s understanding of bigotry and class injustice, makes a statement about the rarity of opportunity for St. Laurent and the other queens. Viewers know she is likely to fail to achieve either her gender goals or her economic aspirations.

While the community that participates in the balls in *Paris is Burning* is relatively small and homogenous (queer men and trans women of color) because of the discrimination they experience, not because they necessarily discriminate, the balls featured in the film accommodate all sorts of aesthetic styles as competitive categories. Drag icon Dorian Corey explains that in the 1980s, drag balls changed from their traditional, over-the-top glamour in order to become more inclusive of other forms of performance and impersonation. Corey indicates that at the time of the making of the film, balls had expanded to include multiple competitive categories, at various levels of gender crossing and disruption: “High Fashion Parisian,” wherein a queen wears a long high-waisted skirt and blouse with a strangely shaped gold hat; “Dynasty,” with queens dressed like Alexis and other characters; “Military,” in which participants dress as service men (in dress uniforms, never combat BDUs, it seems) and perform the rigidity of military march and salute on the floor; “Town and Country,” which shows a queen skipping across the room in equestrian gear and holding a riding crop; as well as a few other categories under the umbrella of “realness.”

“Realness,” as Dorian Corey explains, is “to be able to blend,” “to look as much as possible like your straight counterpart” (which is often a person of the supposed opposite sex) as well as someone who is white—so the failure is built-in. A number of the “realness” categories are indicative of class critique in the drag performances featured. Among the “realness” categories is “Schoolboy/Schoolgirl Realness,” wherein participants dress in collegiate-style clothing and “studious” looking glasses, and prance up and down the floor with various props that hearken to higher learning, such as books and pencils. During this segment of the competition, the announcer calls to the queens who walk, “Going to school. School. Elementary. High School. College. Not here. School.” One queen is shown wearing a Yale University

sweatshirt and, while turning the pages of a prop textbook, artfully poses with it along the makeshift runway before collapsing into a cross-legged pose with the book in his lap. Corey claims it is not a take-off or a satire, but while the performances are not necessarily comedic, they are critical.

The “realness” category, emphasizing the aesthetic of Ivy League institutions, is a critique of the exclusivity of the educational system marked by the cultural stereotype of an educated person as white, heterosexual, and middle or upper class. In this category, the queens dress as both male and female Ivy Leaguers. The runway walk, with its poses along the way, is a metaphor for the well-trodden, fortified road to education and success for white middle-and-upper-class people. In Julian Carter’s history of American social norms, *The Heart of Whiteness*, Ivy League higher education is also, ironically, painted as the location of the normal. This is despite the fact that only a small percentage of the population attend Ivy League schools and, in the period of Carter’s study, very few Americans attended college at all.

Carter explains that in the late 19th and early 20th century, a certain kind of normality was forged in the media and culture that emphasized “specifically heterosexual whiteness” (2). In addition to the racial and sexual components of normality, Carter points out that the norm forged within the media and discourse of the time also drew on averages in build, intellect, hair, and facial characteristics, and other features, averages all compiled from a survey of white Ivy League college students (1).²⁷ Here, Carter shows that middle-and-upper-class bodies have always been central to norms and that the work of building a monolith of the “normal” is inextricably tied to prioritizing bourgeois life. The everyday normality that working-class studies

²⁷ Carter writes the history of two statues, “Normman,” (the two Ms indicate a portmanteau meaning “normal man”) and “Norma,” male and female respectively, which were displayed at the 1939 New York World’s Fair as “The Average American Boy and Girl,” and it is upon these two images that his history of normality is built—these come from the averages of ivy-leaguers.

scholars posit and honor is similar to the norms Carter's study examines. Many leftist representations from the 1930s manifest an eroticized worship of the chiseled, muscular bodies of factory workers, and the hands and limbs of both working-class men and women. These ideals may look different from Carter's, but they do as much to exclude. Aside from a few examples, working class bodies are still imagined as muscular, masculine, and hard-laboring. The fact that the historical evidence Carter employs reveal the specific identity markers of the normal seems fairly evident. Media and feminist scholars have worked for decades to uncover and analyze the racist and sexist components of beauty ideals across the centuries—ideals that are implicitly class-based. Similarly, scholars sustain nostalgia-driven impressions about what sorts of bodies do work—usually pertaining to memories or idealized cultural versions of fathers.²⁸

The idealized version of a strong working man's body, muscular and stout, with large, cracked and hardened hands, earned from gender-normative manual labor, was associated with labor in industries that are not as active in the U.S. as they once were, such as steel production, automobile manufacturing, and the like. This ideal, which has influenced scholars of the working class as well, does not allow for soft-handed or soft-bodied men, who may make their money in ways other than traditional manual labor, such as clerical and retail work, not to mention sex work—all usually associated with women. The queens in *Paris is Burning*, however poor and hardworking they may be, can never fit into the mold created by this physical norm.

Ironically, Carter points to a historical moment in which a Cleveland newspaper conducted a contest called "The Search for Norma" and asked women to send in their body measurements to find a woman who most closely matched the measurements of the statue. The woman who won the contest was notably (that is, surprisingly, to the contest committee) not of the upper or middle classes, but a ticket seller at a local movie theater. This means that the

²⁸ Janet Zandy's *Hands* is a good example.

expectation that the person to fill this norm was based on a cultural ideal, of body and class. The surprise of a working-class woman coming closest to this ideal means that the whole project failed. Carter explains that, in this, “‘What is’ was not, and everybody knew it” (35). One might interpret the fact that the ticket seller won the contest as indication that working-class bodies are the true ideal over those of the middle and upper class. A fuller explanation, however, is that the contest revealed that the norm does not exist. The emphasis on norms in working-class studies is a recapitulation of this willful blindness, wherein a “working-class culture”—a falsely normalizing concept—is treated as though it is, even though it is not. The “is not”-ness of this norm explains how such a similar “norm” was co-opted by the left in the 1930s.

Carter further discusses the heteronormative discourse of the leftist movement in the 1930s: “In the 1930s, the leftist novelist and critic Floyd Dell argued that the material constants on earlier civilizations had hampered both their sexual and political development: only with the coming of the machine age, he held, were people free enough to achieve adult heterosexuality” (36). In Dell’s conception, the machine age—a fantasy of modernity—would be one in which moral corruption would be healed by health and by happiness. Here again, the working class exemplifies what is normal, based on their adherence to white, heterosexual, reproductive family. This heterosexuality is not based merely on attraction to the opposite sex (an opposition problematized in queer theory and culture), but also on essentially moralized and capitalist notions of love, marriage, and nuclear family. So, a person who is attracted to the same sex or bases their attraction on criteria other than gender or sex cannot be categorized as adult or normal.

Promiscuous, adulterous, or polyamorous people also did not count as heterosexual, according to Dell. In this logic, queers, the very poor, participants in contingent economies, drug

addicts, and other immoral people, are not adults, not mature citizens. Because Dell and other leftist scholars held this stand, it might appear that the source of moralizing categorization was the left. Likewise, heterosexual morality here looks an awful lot like the imperialist ideology that writes non-whites as “permanent children incapable of self-rule” and that labels as “perversion,” any notable straying from the “norm” of white heterosexuality. For Dell, modern=adult=normal. Working-class “stable-livers” and “routine-seekers” are better at adulthood because they are moral. The queens in *Paris is Burning* are in many ways the physical and social opposites to this norm. Within any normalizing framework, therefore, the queens can be written off as immature children. Because scholars posit a homophobic, racist notion of “maturity,” they inadvertently perpetuate classism, and harm real people who are not perceived as adults.

Prior discussions of *Paris is Burning* have emphasized the fact that the queens are actually successful in passing as their “straight counterparts,” who are also their wealthy counterparts. However, the fact that these queens compete to be the most convincing as straight or well-to-do people shows how far they are from the subjects they portray. The competitors fail at their mission because of who and where they are. I do not mean to argue that their inability to join the stratum of the rich and famous is the tragedy here. That ideal must be toppled. The tragedy is that this model of living exists, and that people like these queens must suffer and die because of it.

Harper draws on John Howell’s early account of what realness means in the ball context:

“In costume and poise, these artificial Yalies and businessmen would be utterly indistinguishable from the ‘real thing’ on the campus or in the office. Similarly, any general would salute troops who paraded with the spit-and-polish panache of the voguers who impersonate marines. Every detail is duplicated to the minutest

degree, from body language to personality, from clothing to accessories (briefcases, American Express cards, airplane tickets, and Wall Street Journals for the businessmen, letter sweaters and textbooks for the students [11]” (1)

Harper points out that Howell and others like him are mistakenly taken by the notion that “realness” actually produces “likeness,” or that the queens, for the time that they “walk,” become the thing they mimic with no complications or critique in their performance. For Howell, “realness” comes from the success of the impersonation and the verisimilitude of the scavenged costumes.

Harper, on the other hand, suggests that the queens’ endeavors toward “realness” signal complicity with racist and classist white culture:

If, as I am suggesting, this subversiveness pleases [social liberals], it is because it seems to characterize as politically acceptable a phenomenon whose progressiveness must be questionable at first glance, because of both the distinctly cultural—not to say frivolous—mode of its intervention (as opposed to, say, a properly economic one), which renders it unorthodox as a political undertaking in any event, and the particularly conflicted significance of such cultural intervention in the contemporary, post-modern context. (3)

I disagree—what the queens do is an economic intervention, and its subversiveness hinges on their failure. On the one hand, the queens work to complete the aesthetic look of the category they compete in—to seem “real.” On the other hand, however, the queens are conscious of what they do as posing and interloping.

The fact that the winner of most of the ballroom competitions is the queen who is the most believable as a rich, white lady, shows that failure to achieve total “realness” is intrinsic to

the drag project. Likewise, the physical location of these competitions is evidence of the queens' failure to be the kinds of people they impersonate. Rich white people do not compete in drag balls in the basement of the Elks' Lodge. To think that the queens believe themselves successful is to assume they are naïve; they are not. However deprived of education they may be, given public school funding disparities in urban communities of color, the queens are not ignorant as to who they are in relation to the cultures they mimic. The queens exhibiting "realness" at the balls do not pass because they are at the balls, even if they nail a look or attitude on the floor. The fact that they are at the ball disqualifies them from entry into the worlds of the people they portray. They likewise exaggerate the performance, with choreographed movement and hand gestures that would make no sense for any of the kinds of people the queens personify to do.

While capitalist inequity seeks to remain invisible, the walks of "realness" queens make class a spectacle, making the performance very obvious. As one young queen explains at the very beginning of the film, "The balls is as close...as we're going to get to all that fame, fortune, and spotlights." The queens clearly know the impact of racism and homophobia on their chances for upward mobility in the capitalist economy. "Fame, fortune, and spotlights" may not be a complete understanding of who the upper class are, but the revelation still exhibits a profound knowledge of the workings of class and class division.

Arguably, the most critical class critique in the film is the display of the "Executive Realness" competition category at one of the balls. While young queens, dressed in both men's and women's business attire, move up and down the runway, the voice of Dorian Corey explains the significance of this work-and-class-focused category. Centered in this scene is a very young man dressed in a fitted gray three-piece suit, again wearing glasses (a seeming call out to literacy and education) and carrying a briefcase. Corey explains, "In real life you can't get a job as an

executive unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. Now, the fact that you are not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life...Black people have a hard time getting anywhere, and those that do are usually straight.” Corey expresses here what is so significant about the class critique in ball culture in the 1980s, as well as the social and economic conditions that continue to mark the lives of queer people of color in the United States and beyond.

As a drag elder, Corey provides an experience-based intersectional analysis of the people involved in ball culture, and one that creates a spectacularly visual critique of class and heteronormativity. This scene also conveys how this particular drag community mobilizes queer failure toward a class politics. In dressing and posing as “executives” and Ivy League students, among other upper class people, the queens display everything they are not and cannot be. The displacement of their performances, because they are so evidently outside the milieu of higher learning, indicates how race, gender, and sexuality norms impose class immobility. For ball participants, this failure communicates their shared outsider status and builds a collective thinking about what it means to be queer, of color, gender non-normative, and poor in America.

Despite recognizing the significance of “realness” categories at the balls, Corey relays an interpretation of younger realness queens, and herself proposes a false correlation between what “realness” is at the balls, and what it means to “pass” on the street.²⁹ She argues, “It’s really a case of going back into the closet.” Corey implies that “realness” and “passing” are the same, and that they are a capitulation to normativity and the capitalist order. As an outsider to the balls, I’m in no position to disagree with Corey about what queens intend to show in their presentation and performances, or about what “realness” really is. The goal may very well be to pass, and

²⁹ “Reading” in drag culture, is “the real art of insult,” says Dorian Corey. Between the gay world and the straight world, she explains, it’s “a vicious slur fight,” but when it’s between gays, it’s a fine-tuned exercise for skin thickening.

there are reasons that make this a desirable accomplishment. Nonetheless, many “realness” queens in the film do not pass, and those who don’t are as legitimately “real,” it seems, as those who do; they are still “realness queens.” For those who pass, their presence in a ball erases that passing. They fail to be that which they are, in the moment wherein they prove that they are that thing and win their category.

Harper voices concerns about the efficacy of drag in terms of creating cultural and economic critique. He argues that it is too tempting to read the drag performances and ballroom competitions as providing power and agency to the queens by allowing them to form their own identities and “alter apparently fundamental elements of social experience” (91), an understanding he views as a utopian fantasy. Harper asserts, “However much they might enjoy such a capacity in the ballroom, the subjects of *Paris is Burning* were definitely shown to lack it beyond the ball context when they attempted to redefine the terms of the film’s success” (92). Harper’s critique is important here because it analyzes the distinction between the power of the queens in the ballroom versus in juridical spaces, which represents capital. Here, Harper is referencing efforts by the queens to sue Livingston for compensation for their role in the film.³⁰ Harper poses the two settings as scenes of “social self-presentation” in which the queens have very different levels of agency in their own identity formation. He is rightly concerned with the lack of juridical agency the queens had against Livingston once her film succeeded. Though both courtroom and ballroom are spaces of identity formation and articulation, Harper is careful to

³⁰ Paris DuPree, whose ball was the film’s namesake, attempted to sue Livingston for \$40 million, claiming that she had not given Livingston permission to film there or to use the title. Attorneys discovered that she had signed a release. It’s not fair to postulate that DuPree was naïve, but it may be safe to say that none of the queens realized the attention the film and they themselves would receive when they participated in its making. For details on the settlement, read Jesse Green’s *Paris Has Burned*: <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/18/style/paris-has-burned.html>

maintain that the ballroom does not possess the authority of the symbolic order (in psychoanalytic terms) in the way that the courtroom does.

Harper, like many gender theorists, uses the relationship of gender to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the “symbolic” and the “real” to understand the effect and function of drag. He notes that “realness” here is actually aligned with the symbolic and not the real:

Consequently, successful ‘oscillation’ into the symbolic always entails, as well, the subject’s accommodation to it...[W]hen Realness queens exit the ball milieu, which constitutes a kind of imaginary realm, they must—to all appearances at least—conform to the norms of the larger social context that effectively constitutes the symbolic order. (97)

In many ways, Harper is correct. However much “realness” affirms the symbolic order, as Harper points out, that symbolic order never accommodates the film’s border crossers. However, neither does the film pretend it does. The film shows the gravity of the economic lives of these queer people of color outside the balls. The queens in *Paris is Burning* are economically disadvantaged and they know it, they know why, and they protest the injustice of it through drag. Likewise, much of the film’s critical reception, whether negative or positive, hinges on class relationships. Harper critiques Livingston for capitalizing on the culture of disenfranchised people without compensating them financially (a valid and important critique, though it may overestimate Livingston’s earnings from the film), while Howell and others perceive the drag performances as having actual socially uplifting effects, primarily because they are not thinking about class.³¹

³¹ Judith Butler’s reading takes a more positive perspective on the film and Livingston’s relationship to the queens as a lesbian (even though she takes quite seriously the more pointed economic critiques directed at Livingston).

In bell hooks' famous critique of *Paris is Burning*, entitled "Is Paris Burning?" she is also concerned with the intersection of race and class and the film's fetishization of the failure of drag queens of color to accurately mimic or achieve white, upper-class beauty. Most of all, she's concerned with how utterly fucked these and other urban people of color are, and how controlled the queens are by white culture. She does not see resistance in the lives of the queens in the film. She also takes a kind of homophobic and transphobic stance against the queens in terms of their gender transgression. She writes,

Gender bending and blending on the part of black males has always been a critique of phallogentric masculinity in traditional black experience. Yet the subversive power of those images is radically altered when informed by a racialized fictional construction of the "feminine" that suddenly makes the representation of whiteness as crucial to the experience of female impersonation as gender, that is to say when the idealized notion of the female/feminine is really a sexist idealization of white women. (147)

For hooks, the queens' imitations of white women devalue black women. She believes they enact the long-standing tradition of marginalizing black women as less-than, and of deeming white women, and only certain kinds of white women at that, as the only real women. On the one hand, she sees drag as reenacting social aggression against black women, and on the other, she sees this drag community as minstrels made by Jennie Livingston and her white audience.

hooks claims that the queens strive toward whiteness, simplifying their activities into expressions of shame and victimization. She has reason to be concerned. There are moments in the film that imply that these queens understand white womanhood as somehow more desirable than black womanhood, tying into a long global history that has demonized black women. For

instance, Venus explains in an interview, “I’d like to be a spoiled rich white girl...They don’t have to struggle with finances or nice things.” On the surface, this statement reads as a belief in white women as better. However, it actually bespeaks the queens’ understanding of what adherence to normativity provides, in terms of privilege and experience, and that is based in economic class. Venus doesn’t reveal an intrinsic belief that white women are better; rather, she expresses an experiential knowledge that white women, especially those with money, have a better time getting by.

So while the queens do co-opt some elements of mainstream, and therefore white, culture, what they are really striving toward is the kind of comfortable living associated with being white. In a shot showing apparently upper-class New Yorkers walking through an affluent part of the city, a queen’s voice tells the viewer, “This is white America. Any other nationality that is not of the white set knows this and accepts this ‘til the day they die. That is everybody’s dream and ambition as a minority—to live and look as well as a white person is pictured as being in America.” This is not about becoming white, or shame about being a poor person of color. Rather, this is about living well and not teetering on the brink of destitution and death. As the announcer suggests, white people are portrayed in the media as healthy, having nice things, and living comfortably.

The voiceover explains that white people “aren’t on no concrete playground. They’re riding the lawn. There’s a pool in the back. We as a people over the last 500 years, is the greatest example of behavior modification in history [sic].” This proposal is emblematic of the deep awareness of history shown by many of the queens involved in the balls. The queens do not operate blindly with regard to their appropriation of whiteness. It is improbable that a queen would speak this way about a history of behavior modification, and then advocate a similarly

modified behavior toward the norms of whiteness, with no political power. In short, there's a big difference between wanting to be white and wanting the privileges generally afforded to white people. So, while hooks is more than well-informed about the class and race marginalization black people experience, her interpretation of the film is missing a more nuanced understanding of what the gender and class-crossing performances of drag can do. These queens understand exactly how the world works, and they know what they want out of it.

Just as the queens show their wisdom about their social and economic circumstances as people of color, they possess a palpable knowledge of the risk intrinsic to their non-normative gender expression. The danger of gender subversion is palpable in *Paris is Burning*, especially for queens who not only walk in balls but also identify as women in the world and seek sex reassignment surgeries. This risk in being gender-variant out in the world works in the same way as does the risk of class confrontation. The risk is an inevitable part of the movement of history and the social order, though it tends to be experienced on the scale of the self or a small collective, because of moralism around sex and gender that pervades culture and politics. This danger is both a hardship of queer life and a phenomenon that has some poignancy as a mode of queer failure. Death as the ultimate failure looms over the film because of the death of one of the film's most compelling and charismatic stars, transgender woman Venus Xtravaganza, who was murdered and found in a hotel room, more than likely by a john. hooks claims that the film treats the death of Venus very casually, in an effort to maintain the levity and comedy of the spectacle as it is presented to white audiences. However, the film is not casual at all about the death of Venus Xtravaganza. In fact, the following several minutes of the film (after the revelation that Venus has been killed) are comprised of a somber reflection on the dangers to poor trans women of color by Angie Xtravaganza, mother of the House of Xtravaganza. We learn that the police

came to Angie, because there was no one else to claim the body, and that Angie was shown a photo of the murdered body of Venus. Angie Xtravaganza talks about the loss of her dear friend: “That’s a part of life as far as being a transsexual in New York City and surviving.” Angie’s reflection upon this violence and death as a regular part of life for transsexual women is not an indication of the film’s casual treatment of the death. Rather, it’s an indication of the frequency of loss experienced by queer people of color.

However, despite what Harper and hooks argue, none of the queens can ever truly fill the roles of those they imitate. Again, the film does not pretend they can. Likewise, Harper points to the queens’ safety in the ballroom, as opposed to in the outside world and juridical spaces as an argument about why the gender they enact is ultimately ineffectual or at least not revolutionary. While drag performance is not effectual as a route to class advancement, it very much exposes the impossibility thereof, which indicates its significance as queer failure.

Another important critique of the film concerns the position and relationship of the director Jennie Livingston, to her subjects and subject matter. As an economically privileged white woman from Los Angeles who graduated from Yale, Livingston is largely an outsider to the ball scene (although Judith Butler explains how as a queer woman, Livingston is not wholly an outsider).³² Her economic privilege gives her access to “the word”, the cultural podium, which the queens in the film (and queer people of color today) do not have. Since the early 1990s, critics of the film such as Harper and hooks have been concerned about the way the film supposedly made a successful career for Livingston, without changing anything about the social

³² In “Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” from *Bodies That Matter*, Butler points out that “If Livingston is the white girl with the camera, she is both the object and vehicle of desire; and yet, as a lesbian, she apparently maintains some kind of identificatory bond with the gay men in the film, and also, it seems, with the kinship system...that sustains the drag ball scene” (134). Butler also importantly notes that “neither Livingston nor hooks considers the place and force of ethnicity in the articulation of kinship relations” (134). I’d add that no one discusses how social class combines with ethnicity toward this subject.

circumstances of the subjects of the film. On this basis, it is reasonable to question Livingston on her exploitation of the participants. However, Livingston has not had the successful filmmaking career *Paris is Burning* might have signaled. She has made other films, but none nearly as widely acclaimed as this film.

Questions about Livingston's exploitation of her subjects are admittedly crucial in thinking about the film and its resistance to normativity. I agree that Livingston's identity as a white middle-class lesbian impacts what the queens say during their interviews; I wonder what kinds of race and class critiques the queens may have left out in order not to alienate their interviewer. Despite such concerns, though, this film has gotten out from under the director in the years since its release. Queens and queers continue to love the film, and it continues to screen frequently at film festivals and queer events, even though the critical trepidation about the exploitative relationship of filmmakers to their subjects remains (and should). The film has queer staying power for a reason. It stands as a classic, separate from Livingston. While the film was not the catalyst for creating the ball scene, its existence has helped to solidify the place of drag and ball culture and queer culture, and has aided in maintaining class critique in queer culture by bringing it to the forefront. It is harder to make an auteur-directed argument about Livingston; she's hardly Werner Herzog. Livingston's position as the documenter is only a part of the influence of the film.

The film is beloved, though many queens are also aware of the problems with the film, and have been since the beginning. Crystal LaBeija, the founder of the house of La Beija, warned in an interview that Livingston "won't make any money off of my name darling, she can make it off of Harlowe and all the rest of the fools who will flock to her, but not Crystal, darling."³³

³³ "Crystal LaBeija 'You won't make money off of my name, darhhlinng.'" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qYUd6D5Sxw

Crystal LaBeija is referring to the complicity of other members of the ball scene with Livingston's economic exploitation of their culture. When critics persist in the idea that the film celebrates the effectivity of white hegemony on poor people of color, and argue that the queens are simply duped by a predatory Livingston, they do not give enough credit to the queens creating and maintaining the drag scene, in and since the film, to understand their position within the heteronormative, white, capitalist economy. No one knows better than they do.

It is arguably fair to claim that the film filled an enormous void in queer media representation. While no individual in the film was really "better off" economically after the making of the film the bulk of the film's cultural legacy is with the queens and not Jennie Livingston. The film's most charismatic personas remain part of the queer cultural canon twenty-six years later, though most of them have since died, many from AIDS complications. That is, community- and history-minded queers in various segments of the queer community recognize the names of Pepper LaBeija, Venus Xtravaganza, and Dorian Corey, and recite lines from the film, particularly the more philosophically moving reflections of Dorian Corey, which deal primarily with class. The language of drag taught in the film still circulates in queer communities.

A more recent echo of *Paris is Burning* in popular culture is the reality series *Ru Paul's Drag Race*. Ru Paul, who was brought up working-class by a single mother,³⁴ is a prominent and well-known drag performer, who came to mainstream fame in the early 1990s. Her program airs on the cable television channel LOGO—a decidedly middle-to-upper class LGBT-devoted network that, for the most part, reflects and serves the interests of white, upper-class gays and lesbians. Just as I don't necessarily want to rescue *Paris is Burning* from critique, it is not my

³⁴ Charles, RuPaul. *Lettin It All Hang Out: An Autobiography*. New York: Hyperion, 1996.

goal to idealize *Drag Race* as altogether working-class. Nonetheless, the drag culture it operates in and from is still very working-class.

Generally speaking, LOGO does not have a radical queer edge in its programming, and in fact, some of the network's more queer-oriented shows have fallen back into a kind of voyeuristic mode of representation that Others transgender people, people of color, and the poor. However, *Drag Race* has a more complex relationship to queer life and to race than most other LOGO programming. It rarely deals with class overtly, and the most evident class statement in it is about reaching for high-class refinement and glamour. Still, as in many other competition reality programs, the contestants' back-stories are told (as part of the emotional hook for viewers). In the case of competitors on *Drag Race*, poverty is a repeated trope. The contestants on *Drag Race* were assigned masculine gender at birth. Gay men, especially effeminate gay men, are often rejected by their families and communities. Like a lot of the queens in the earlier *Paris is Burning*, several of the contestants were homeless as teenagers and young adults, or had been on their own and caring for themselves since they were minors, having been kicked out of their family homes. In these cases, abandoned gay youth are sent out into the world without anything, including a solid class affiliation to the working or capitalist classes.

Many contestants on *Drag Race* are working-class and poor people of color, and furthermore, many are immigrants to the United States from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Africa. As people from the Global South, a number of *Drag Race* contestants are in a geopolitically classed position in relation to the United States. The geographical spaces that many of the queens come from have been colonized territories of both European and American imperialism. This pattern might suggest a troubling exploitation of immigrant people for American entertainment purposes. It is important to acknowledge that *Drag Race* has the potential to be received by

outside viewers as a kind of minstrelsy, or a voyeuristic glimpse into an outcast subculture. To already-prejudiced viewers, the queens' antics and eschewing of gender and sexual norms will easily vindicate belief in the absurdity or immorality of queer people, especially those of color. Nevertheless, it is not valuable to gauge the usefulness of a political statement or a cultural critique by the potential response of bigoted people. In addition, while it is likely that some of LOGO's viewers, despite their presumed homosexuality, might respond with moral disdain or condescension, the show is still about people who are generally outcast, and largely working- and poverty-class. The show raises the queens up on very different terms than the traditional class-ascendance narrative.

Although much of the fashion of *Drag Race* is "couture," the show also captures the DIY element of drag's roots, evident in the altered and homemade clothing displayed in *Paris is Burning*. While the production of *Drag Race* provides a number of pricier items (wigs, fabrics, shoes) to the contestants, it also requires the queens to design and sew (or build) their own attire. While this may seem no different from the process in shows that are not connected with working-class experience like *Project Runway*, it actually reflects back on the history of drag as a thing working-class gay men and trans women created on a budget of nothing. It reflects the ability of drag queens to make something beautiful out of someone else's cast-offs.

Another way the show actually conveys a class-critical edge is in the vocabulary of drag that it persistently exhibits. A lot of drag vocabulary has a working-class or class-critical edge. In the portion of the show entitled "Reading is Fundamental," the queens critique one another in a "playing the dozens"-style battle of wits, which incorporates "reading" as defined by Dorian Corey in *Paris is Burning*. The "Reading is Fundamental" game is a pantomime of education and literacy, by way of besting others through pointedly witty insults. Along the same lines, the term

“sickening” refers to a queen who has accomplished a kind of spectacular transformation, and who has seamlessly interwoven a drag persona with an artful aesthetic that transcends “realness.” However, it also indicates a visceral sense of excess or unbelonging. Within the evidently cheaply constructed (not to be mistaken for somehow humble!!) walls of the “Interior Illusions Lounge” (itself an unpackable term—the illusion is one of gender and class), a stand-in for actual opulence, to be “sickening” implies the bodily inappropriateness of the glamour of the privileged. It also suggests, on the other hand, that the wearer of the drag persona is out of place somehow. “Sickening” is a synonym for “disgusting,” implying a connection to abjection as well. This term acknowledges a resentment of the upper classes built into drag, and it comments ironically on the moral and physical disgust people have with regard to homosexuality, queer bodies, and queer acts. The term also hints at envy of the wealthy, as working-and-poverty-class people have long found displays of opulent wealth to be strangely horrific. However, the power of the term is primarily in the mismatch, the cognitive dissonance, of a queen exhibiting high fashion glamour. In other words, it is “sickening” that “a man in a dress” can look so good.

The “Interior Illusions Lounge” and runway on *Drag Race* also become the unlikely sites of mourning for the queens. Scenes of queens waiting to go before the panel of celebrity judges (no doubt a troubling power dynamic) are tense. They often must defend their worthiness by reflecting on childhood bullying, deaths of friends, estrangement from family and loved ones. Here, they express anxieties about survival in queer lives and communities. Unlike a lot of other mainstream gay programming and representation, *Drag Race* hasn’t forgotten the AIDS epidemic, which was so central to gay scholarship and the gay movement in the 1980s. In the first season, the eventual winner, Ongina, confesses on the runway that she has HIV. Ru Paul and the other queens receive this news with appropriate gravity. Ru Paul, taking an earnest maternal

tone, instructs the queens that “We are all sisters,” and that “we are all in trouble.” The mourning invoked here is highly classed. In the present day, the urgency of the AIDS crisis is no longer felt in the mainstream. Discussions of the disease are no longer foregrounded as they were in the 1980s, and it seems that the problem is mostly alleviated or no longer exists, because the media does not cover it anymore. Yes, many are living with AIDS by using medications that strengthen the immune system. However, those without access to health care and expensive medication are still in grave danger. In this way, though *Drag Race* is not specifically a working-class text, it is connected to a community that is largely working-class, and it is frequently concerned with issues that are both specifically queer and specifically related to the economic struggles of queer people.

To show the working-class nature of queer failure, it is important to discuss queer folks currently living working-class lives. Queer communities are, for the most part, enclaves of working-class people. The distinction between communities that are “queer” and GLBT communities is often related to the class status and value systems of the people involved.³⁵ This phenomenon is connected to intersectional politics—the more strikes against a person in terms of normative failure, the more “queer” a person becomes. Added to this, there is a kind of disavowal of the norm as desirable, the further one is from reaching normative identity and embodiment. This is a reversal of Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism, because instead of striving for normativity, sometimes queer people just detach and become indifferent to normative expectations of the broader culture. Many queer people find the unreachable goal of inclusion into the norm to be a waste of time, and of personal and political energy. In addition to distance from the norm, the distinction between “queer” and “GLBT” relates to political involvement and

³⁵ Part of queer politics revolves around the problem in GLBT discourse wherein the ‘T’ is “silent.” That is, even though the anagram includes the letter for Transgender, trans people are nonetheless discriminated against within the supposedly inclusive umbrella term “GLBT.”

activity, solidarity with other oppressed groups outside, and anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal activism, and participation in creative culture.

Many queer communities in urban centers, especially those in former centers of industry, in which there are a variety of working-class communities, embrace class-consciousness and solidarity. For instance, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has a long and well-documented working-class history. The queer community in Pittsburgh is an expansive but often intimate, network of people. Pittsburgh is, like a lot of cities, very segregated by class and by race. Because of this, the queer and GLBT communities of Pittsburgh also struggle with division and alienation along racial lines. Additionally, within the more homonormative GLBT communities, the dividing lines also include gender, meaning that gay men and lesbians are separate and don't socialize or attend to one another's political needs. The exceptions to this are social settings generally inhabited by more radically queer people. Despite the fact that queer communities struggle with segregation and the same way that the larger society does, the lines between the queer community, the broader GLBT community, the black working-class and black activists, feminist and women's rights organizations, and local artist communities and collectives in Pittsburgh, regularly blur. Specifically, reproductive justice organizations, homeless and poor outreach, and anti-racist movements overlap and frequently encompass the same highly active, highly politically active individuals. There is no doubt a long way to go (always) in terms of building solidarity. This project works from the position of queerness and queer failure, but I do not want to suggest that my intervention is the ultimate or most important.

In the queer community in Pittsburgh, there are a number of notable artists creating work that speaks to class issues and to identity within the framework of queer and class failure. One Pittsburgh artist, photographer Caldwell Linker, takes the local queer community, of which they

are a part, as their subject matter, incorporating candid and posed shots from semi-public queer events (i.e. groups of queer people en masse at dance parties and performance events), and the private moments of queer friends and lovers at Linker's home and other queer private spaces.³⁶ Linker's photography displays the strong connection between working-class issues and queer failure. Additionally, it reflects joy and collectivity-building potential, along with glimpses of the pain and difficulty survived by those in Pittsburgh's queer community.

Linker is well known for their work depicting the drag scene in Pittsburgh, particularly a drag "house" known as "The Haus of Haunt," which operates primarily at The Blue Moon, a local gay bar in the working-and-poverty-class neighborhood of upper-Lawrenceville. The Pittsburgh drag scene is directly linked to Drag Race because season four winner Sharon Needles and season five runner-up Alaska Thunderfuck are both part of the same drag scene documented by Linker.³⁷ Linker's photography book, *All Through the Night: Artifacts of Queer Community*, which accompanies an exhibit of the same name at The Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh from June 15, 2013 through September 15, 2013, collects images from several queer gatherings at small local venues and from late nights among friends in homes and bedrooms. I chose this book as a subject because it branches out from drag into a broader queer community. It contains more of the kind of failure that resists capital without catastrophe—the Halberstam model of failure, in

³⁶ Linker requests not to be gendered, so the otherwise plural "they" is the preferred pronoun to eradicate gender from discussion of their work.

³⁷ It is important here to complicate the potential perception of many that the queer scene is somehow impervious to profound political error. Though it is not widely known nationally, a great deal of controversy surrounds Sharon Needles. Prior to her appearance on *Drag Race*, Needles had a reputation for pushing the boundaries of racial sensitivity. In many of her shows, she appeared in a dragified version of a Nazi uniform, complete with a swastika armband. Likewise, she has performed wrapped in a confederate flag, signaling to a racist American history, with, arguably, no real commentary on its power or potential harmful nature to those living in the neighborhoods that house Pittsburgh queer venues, such as Upper Lawrenceville, a primarily black and working-class locale. While Needles is otherwise regarded as an artist, her use of racist symbols in earlier performances lacked critical edge, and was propelled primarily by audience shock and discomfort. More to the point, Sharon Needles' insensitive artistic choices have brought discomfort to many queer people of color in the community, as well as others who perceive racist symbols to be decidedly not for white artists' reclamation. To the credit of Sharon Needles, however, she has not returned to this costuming for any further performances.

which working-class queers “refuse mastery” of gender and artistic expression (11). In each of the photos, the subjects fail beautifully, in both a queer and class frameworks. Rather than intimating that the subjects of these images are “losers,” the purpose herein is to formulate an understanding of a collective mode of being in the Pittsburgh community that relates to the broader political purposes of bringing queer failure into working-class studies.

The photo on the cover of *All Through the Night* depicts a young black man in make-up and wearing a wide-brimmed woman’s hat, adorned with a pink scarf bow knotted messily but purposefully in the front. He wears a lace and mesh form-fitting black tank top. His gaze extends just past the camera, his lips are loose and sensual in a manner generally associated with the feminine. His appearance cannot be easily designated as cross-dressing or drag but rather disrupts gender and class without fitting either neatly back together. The young man also bears a well-groomed full beard, and his tank top reveals a muscular body that defies its own masculinity in the vulnerable sensuality of his dress and gesture. The subject of this photo fails in a queer sense because he does not fit neatly into a normative gender category, nor does he fully inhabit the performative space of drag or cross-dressing. Likewise, as a person of color, he fails to inhabit any stereotypes of blackness or black masculinity—a position that disrupts norms against which he is supposedly placed. The classed nature of this image is arguably less evident. However, it is nonetheless present in both where the photo was taken, and in the thrifted nature of the aesthetic the man in the photo exhibits.

Members of the queer community in Pittsburgh, as in other cities, are committed to the long-noted DIY elements of drag and punk theorized by Dick Hebdige in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, and the photo is emblematic of the kind of thrifted glamour of queer working-

class people, especially gay and effeminate men, and trans-identified “M2F” people.³⁸ In this cover photo, the man is not shabbily dressed by any means, but his ensemble retains a “bricolage” element, as defined by Hebdige. In this Pittsburgh community, there is no status connected with high-price clothing or accessories. Of course, this thriftiness differentiates this group of people from those represented in *Paris is Burning*. Determining class legitimacy based on clothing (or any single outward characteristic) is murky territory. Many privileged people wear thrifted clothing, and many underprivileged people wear more expensive clothing (attained both legally and illegally). Still, in the space of working-class Pittsburgh, DIY fashion is about creating art and expression from limited resources. The dance party where many of these photos are taken is “Operation Sappho,” a reference to the lesbian poet of ancient Greece. This party was held at various bars around the working-class neighborhoods of Pittsburgh’s east end.

It is difficult to make a concise argument about the class position of queer spaces around Pittsburgh. Even in working-class neighborhoods, there’s a draw for privileged young people from more affluent areas, especially university campuses, to have inexpensive, non-mainstream experiences. It is also difficult to determine what stage of the process of neighborhood gentrification the bars where these events operate in. On the east end of Pittsburgh, a great deal of “urban renewal” projects are underway, and they are near the locations of queer gathering spaces. However, The Blue Moon and Remedy bars are set in an area that has not been taken up in renewal and gentrification programs. The patrons of both bars are young working-class people, young queer people, and older working-class gay men and trans women. At the Brillo Box bar (named after the famous Andy Warhol sculpture), on the border between Bloomfield and Lawrenceville, the crowd draws young, white intellectuals, though it is not specifically gay or straight-leaning. At all these venues, the question about how to deal with the imposition of

³⁸ M2F is shorthand for the male-to-female gender transition.

ogling normative heterosexuals, and how to maintain the energy of the queer DIY quality has been an ongoing question.

A terrific cultural moment that shows the thrifted and DIY elements of queer culture occurs in a viral video that made the Internet rounds in 2010, from a Seattle news broadcast, covering a huge sale at the local Goodwill. The interviewer asks a shopper what he's there for, and holding several women's shirts and dresses, he answers, in a notably effeminate voice, "tons of fucking sequins!" He covers his mouth, embarrassed by his own inadvertent use of an expletive. The news report began with the camera focusing on a pair of Manolo Blahnik shoes on sale at this Goodwill, an image almost immediately followed by the wonderful cursing man. This clip indicates a kind of ecstatic response to the sudden accessibility of otherwise expensive designer clothing for a working-class queen. It also indicates the working-and-poverty-class foundations of "camp" in the queer sense, which is all about failure.³⁹

Another photo in Linker's book that conveys the relationship between the gender-disrupting queer aesthetic and working-class life is that of local Pittsburgh drag star Mahogany La'Piranha dressed in faux furs and standing in the light of the Garfield-Friendship thoroughfare of Pittsburgh's Penn Avenue. The location of this photo is significant because the neighborhood of Garfield, on the northern side of Penn Avenue, is one of the more impoverished, primarily black neighborhoods in the East End of Pittsburgh, while the neighborhood on the south side of the intersection, Friendship, is heavily populated with university students and out-of-town immigrants to Pittsburgh. Friendship residents, while not necessarily wealthy, generally possess a certain level of privilege and cultural capital primarily through education. Friendship's real estate market is notoriously higher than that of Garfield, so much so that the same house could

³⁹ In Susan Sontag's famous "Notes on Camp," she argues that "camp" is an apolitical phenomenon, which has been importantly and successfully refuted by queer critics, specifically Moe Meyers, in his book *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*.

change \$60,000 in market value depending on what side of the street it's on.⁴⁰ Mahogany, a black drag queen from Pittsburgh, looks queerly glamorous in the photo, because of her “realness” as a queen, exhibiting both the glamour she impersonates and a critique of it as superficial and exclusionary. That she stands on the street in the middle of a thoroughfare that is literally the line between poverty and gentrification is meaningful. She is out-of-place, one might argue, on either side of the street. As a queer person of color, she's outcast by the normative modes of both middle-class and working-class communities. As a working-class person, Mahogany's placement in the middle indicates her superficial alienation from working-class identity because of her non-normative personhood.

Some elements of less Halberstam-esque failure in Linker's book are in the realm of health and the body's failures. In a more private photograph in Linker's book, a young man lies in a hospital bed. His expression is both pained and steadfast. The backstory behind this photo lends a clearer account of the failure of the queer body. Travis, pictured, also a transman, is in this moment suffering the effects of Crohn's disease. The photo represents a queer, transgender person at his most vulnerable—ill and at the mercy of the classist and transphobic health care system. Likewise, the photo captures moment of queer and bodily failure; the power therein is potent and palpable. The photograph takes place at the moment when his body fails to function, as he is made vulnerable by the failure to pass as a normative heterosexual, cisgender white male by the circumstances of medical care. The photo shows a significantly classed queer failure, and is honest about a moment of pain in a way that is not sensational. In addition, the photo

⁴⁰ One need only to peruse the Pittsburgh real estate listings on any number of sites to see the property value disparity between primarily black and primarily white neighborhoods. This has changed somewhat since Pittsburgh has gained national notoriety for its “livability.” The University of Pittsburgh's Neighborhood Information System is also a resource for information on this subject: <http://www.ucsur.pitt.edu/pncis.php>.

acknowledges by way of its calm, that it is in fact not a fleeting pain this man suffers, but pain that does and will continue to persist.

While issues of inadequate health care and illness are easy to connect to class, transgender issues are frequently misunderstood as middle-to-upper class issues, perhaps because of the expense of the surgical procedures associated with physically becoming another gender. It may also be because gender transition is perceived as an aesthetic concern—normative gender is understood as natural, so a change is an addition, rather than a shift. This view follows the logic of the hierarchical distinction in linguistic theory between the marked and unmarked—between the generic, unmarked term “poet” and the marked, gendered “poetess,” say—a distinction often noted in feminist and race theory. One is born naturally cisgender (unmarked) and becomes trans (marked) by choice, according to this model. Research has shown, however, that discrimination has a direct impact on the economic status of transgender people. In the transgender community, unemployment is double the percentage rate of the mainstream population, and significant percentages of trans people have reported losing jobs due to anti-trans prejudice. Many have likewise reported that they participate in illegal modes of income-earning, such as the drug trade and prostitution. These circumstances are significantly worse for transgender people of color: “People of color in general fare worse than white participants, across the board, with African American transgender respondents faring far worse than all others in most areas examined” (“Injustice at Every Turn”).

Additionally, transphobia remains a powerful obstacle for trans people in terms of employment, housing, and health care. Transwomen especially are often more visually identifiable as trans. Along with continuing misogyny, the visible gender variance creates considerable discrimination against trans women. Moreover, both transmen and transwomen

experience discrimination and abuse in health care scenarios. It is often difficult to find healthcare practitioners who are sympathetic to transgender people, and it is even harder to find practitioners who are knowledgeable about trans bodies and issues (“Injustice at Every Turn”). Deferment of care for health problems, of course, can lead to insurmountable expense in the future when a treatable illness becomes a serious malady requiring expensive specialists and procedures or becomes terminal.

Linker’s book deals with less traumatic bodily failure in its presentation of non-normative bodies and bodies that are not traditionally “attractive.” Fat bodies, hairy, scarred, and blemished bodies are eroticized in the context of the queer safe spaces Linker shows, without exploitation. This framing comes through in photos of half-dressed and costumed drag queens who, like the man in the cover photo, display mixed-gender and sex markers—sometimes with genitalia visible, penises and breasts (synthetic or “real”) on the same body (but in control of the owner, rather than exploited as in pornography), or with “male” chests and “tucked” penises.⁴¹ Moreso, Linker photographs members of the queer community in Pittsburgh creating body-positive safe spaces with artist performances and audience participation events. In their work, Linker depathologizes all kinds of bodies—eradicating a normative mode of bodily presentation.

Lauren Berlant’s discussion of pervasive rhetoric regarding health and obesity in *Cruel Optimism* indicates the link between this issue and queer issues. Normative beauty is also fundamentally determined by class. Berlant links cultural discourse about obesity with rhetoric about Otherness in general. She explains, “It would be easy and not false to talk about this as an orchestrated surreality made to sell drugs, services, and newspapers, and to justify particular new governmental and medicinal oversight of the populations whose appetites are out of control (a

⁴¹ Here, I use scare quotes around terms that are considered within queer vernacular to be too imposing of identity. For instance, I use quotation marks around the word “male,” because without the expressed preference of the person embodied, I don’t want to assume that all owners of flat chests identify as men.

conventional view of the masses, subalterns, the sexually identified, and so on)” (103). Berlant links a number of different categories of Otherness into a moralism attached to the current capitalist and statist ideology. In essence, unhealthy people and the obese are subject to extreme moral judgment. For the ill, to be out in public is an affront, because it either endangers others who may contract illness as well, reminds them of their privileged status, or reminds them of their own physical fragility that is shielded by access to healthcare and healthy living.

Berlant presents this moralism herein as seemingly politically invisible, indicating that those on the left and the right “moralize about” health as it manifests in bodily appearance. She further asserts that “serious and opportunistic social change agents alike flail away at the obesity epidemic by amplifying moral and political urgencies in any and every possible register” (104). The simultaneously voyeuristic treatment of obesity parallel treatments of queer life, connected by the thread of what is perceived as “unsafe” or “unhealthy.” The fat-versus-fit dichotomy has a complex relationship to individual agency—liberals tend to understand, I think, how diet contributes to health, but energy levels and physical appearance are thought of as pertaining to individual temperament alone. Berlant notes the “apartheid-like” structure of health shaming, and discusses the way that supposed unhealth is perceived as a “bad” personal decision, separate from any politics, but that is likewise Othered because of the view of ill health as a social “liability,” which if accepted will corrupt the well-being of the population (106). While Berlant’s discussion revolves around obesity and the troubling nature of anti-fatism in the mainstream, her perspective can apply to any body that does not meet the ideal-as-norm.

In the media culture that birthed television shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *The Swan*, it is fair to say that even healthy bodies that do not meet the standard become pathologized. Queer bodies are already pathologized as threatening to the social order because they disrupt the binary

organization of gender and sex. When queerness meets ill health (actual or supposed), this Othering becomes untenable; these circumstances almost always come together around economic deprivation.

All Through the Night also contains a series of photographs in succession portraying community members on an elevated runway performing dances and strip-teases. Audience participation and costuming are common at queer events and the line between performers and attendees has always been hazy. Participants photographed here are creatively and glitzy dressed, in visibly DIY style. The bodies of the performers convey a wide-range of variously “flawed” or “imperfect” iterations of the human form. Linker mediates the conveyance of the bodies as little as possible. Likewise, the photographs are not airbrushed or photoshopped, nor are they imbued with any outside lighting intended to hide bodily “flaws.” A particular photograph from this series shows a man stripped to his underwear. His arms are held up in a pose typical of female performers, drag queens, and other divas. His thick glasses are still on his face, slipping down his nose, and his thick body hair is untamed.

Significantly, his body is not traditionally fit, but rotund and undefined. He nonetheless appears, if not joyful, then certainly defiant about his bodily presence.⁴² The failure here comes through on the level of moralism about health and physical fitness. This man fails at both masculinity and femininity. He is not disfigured, “ugly,” or “fat,” but he still fails at beauty ideals embedded in “health and fitness” beauty (and industry) ideals. The man fails, in a sense, to try to attain these goals. While he falls outside mainstream body ideals, he is also outside GLBT homonormative body ideals. His audience receives him outside the rubric of traditional masculine beauty. In American mainstream (middle-to-upper-class) gay male culture, there is an

⁴² Fat bodies work similarly in *Paris is Burning* and *Drag Race*, embraced as part of “realness,” and aren’t thought to interfere with the ability to wear a garment, persona, or attitude.

intense pressure for men to have “perfect,” tight, muscular bodies. This pressure, too, has a moralistic history related to AIDS and HIV, as well as the history of gay male sensuality showing deference to the ideal of the macho man.

Finally, Linker’s *All Through the Night* touches on political activism around class and the contingent economy of sex work. A two-page spread features a photo of a queer group at the G20 protest march in Pittsburgh in 2009, showing marchers carrying signs reading “Honk for Homos”; “Heteronormativity is the opiate of the masses”; and “Sex Work is Work.” Here, Linker’s images highlight the strong link between queer politics and class politics. They also show how queer working-class people see the moralist dividing lines about what constitutes work. Just as Marx held that “religion is the opiate of the people,” a drug impeding collective class consciousness, the queer protesters here argue through their signage that heteronormativity has as much power as religion in determining moral behavior. In this way, heteronormativity blocks the roadway to consciousness. Also implied in this message is an awareness of the politics of class and the history of labor in Pittsburgh’s queer community. The sign the protesters hold denotes the understanding that queer politics is intrinsically connected to class politics, a connection that queers are aware of, but that is absent from working-class studies.

On the opposite page, a male stripper, shown nude from the back, is fore-grounded by an audience in a semi-shabby bar interior. Here, the failure is in terms of normative sexuality and sexual morals, related specifically to class—sex work is usually a final alternative for those in significant need of money. He can only sell his “labor,” but this labor is not productive (or at least, not traditionally so). Because it is not heterosexual sex work, it is not even a simulation of (re)productivity. Nonetheless, it is work. Sex workers are often considered proletarian, because they sell their labor power and do not own the means of production, even though this work is

perceived by many to lack cultural value. Perhaps, in the case of sex work, there is no specifically tangible means of production. The focus on sex work as a class issue leads into the next chapter's discussion of crime and contingent economies as they pertain to queer failure and to class.

Radical cultural critique through the lenses of class and queer failure faces great possibilities and substantial limitations. On the one hand, scholarship in working-class studies continues to reinscribe a nearly always heterosexual, too often white moralistic norm as the basis for a working-class culture. Scholars in the field repeatedly posit a single, monolithic working class that possesses distinct cultural features and preferences that can be examined as cohesive with economic status, leaving out the myriad of queer issues. This unfortunate tendency is synced into a history of normative moralism on both the right and the left about the lower classes. On the other hand, contemporary queer theory has dealt with class fairly substantively, especially in the work of a few key scholars, such as Jack Halberstam. Halberstam's work on queer failure conveys a highly relevant class critique in the notion that success is based on upper and middle-class ideologies, the refusal of which can challenge capitalist conscription. Scholarship such as Halberstam's also recognizes the working-class nature of queer communities, especially those of color. Halberstam misses some of the more traumatic, non-revolutionary elements of failure, though, in not always acknowledging the ultimate failure, which is death—violence imposed by class deprivation and the policing of heteronormativity by the world. This examination of *Paris is Burning*, Ru Paul's Drag Race, and the photography of Caldwell Linker has sought to elucidate the connections between queer theories of failure and class analysis, as well as the class marginalization of queer people. These textual studies can

shed light on the queer nature of many working-class lives, once class ceases to be designated by conformity with moral or cultural norms.

Chapter Two

White Masculinity Reborn:

Success Mistaken for Failure and the Criminal Economy of *Breaking Bad*⁴³

Despite anti-normative thrusts, existing theories of queer failure are limited in scope with regard to class, and their vision of what it means to fail is contingent upon access to success in a normative milieu: failure is either a choice or an aesthetically polished rendering of a tension between desire and conformity. This weakness in the paradigm of queer theories of failure matches the trouble I point to in working-class studies scholarship, which attends to only one moral code, used by one side to define a class, and by the other to celebrate defiance. Those who fail because morality is out of their reach altogether, rather than through conscious disobedience, and those for whom dominant moral codes are meaningless, are left out of both queer failure and working-class belonging. Since the working-class is so frequently represented in the form of white heteronormativity, a show like *Breaking Bad* can be revered for its representation of the working class in a main character who is anything but, while other, non-normative people being exploited in a capitalist relationship to white masculinity are made invisible. Capitalist success

⁴³ This analysis is inspired as a response to a conversation that took place after a panel on pop culture and television at the 2011 WCSA conference in Chicago, in which someone asked a question about what we are to make of representations of working-class people who turn to crime such as the drug trade in order to deal with economic hardship. *Breaking Bad* was used as an example. The answer given was the troublingly simplistic statement “It’s just a bad decision.” In fairness to the speaker and interlocutor, the subject of the panel was not working-class crime or the drug trade. However, it struck me that the bluntness of this moralism dissolved the complexities of the ethical dilemmas in criminal activity, as well as the role of poor and working class people involved. It struck me as troublingly similar to the Reaganist mantra of the War on Drugs, “Just Say No.” Likewise, it was a particularly incomplete reading of *Breaking Bad*.

that is overtly immoral can be misrecognized as a form of anti-capitalist rebellion when it is enacted by a white male.

Jack Halberstam's theory of failure does not deal with alterity much beyond sexual non-normativity or frolicsome non-adherence to the temporal regimes of modernity. Failures are not only playful bohemian types, but can also be dangerous and destructive to the lives and livelihoods of other economically vulnerable people. The light-heartedness of her inquiry into failure is evidenced by the texts she chooses as examples: animated children's movies like *Chicken Run*, and *Monster's Inc.*, as well as atrocious box-office comedies like *Dude, Where's My Car?* Halberstam likes these texts because "much of their dramatic intensity [draws] from the struggle between human and non-human creatures," which is a kind of mirroring of the relations between normative and non-normative people, and, in a kind of vulgar way, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (28). Halberstam does take the argument to the "bleak territories of failure" later in the tome, but the focus of the theory is largely in proposing an understanding of failure as a style of queer living that shirks heteronormative models of success (23). She poses queer failure predominantly as a presence akin to a tender monster, forgetting that some modes of class experience can't and don't render such heartwarming imagery.

Halberstam's kind of failure, like queerness itself, is the ontological territory of the non- or anti-normative, and it has potent usefulness in excavating hidden enclaves of life and culture, by either bringing previously ignored groups and individuals into consideration as sites of revolutionary potential. It makes sense, then, that the objects of critical inquiry in these kinds of readings would be obscure or largely unknown, perhaps underground or forgotten, people and texts that capture worlds of otherness that we find unsavory and unfit. Halberstam argues that failure is something queers have always excelled at; it is something that lumpen people have

always done as well, and it may be that queers fail because they are largely forced into impoverished working-class lives.

The objects of inquiry in the previous chapter, *Paris is Burning* and *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, are not necessarily obscure texts. Livingston's film is well-known, a decidedly canonical text in film and queer studies. Likewise, *Drag Race* is an unsurprisingly popular show on the LOGO network, which is dedicated to mainstreaming gay culture. *Drag Race* even has a relatively large mainstream heterosexual following, likely due to the show's adherence to the formula of other reality television style competitions and its near-erasure of the radical queer history of drag. In addition, while Caldwell Linker's photography is not widely known, it has been vetted by its exhibition in the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. Despite the mainstream reception of texts representing drag and queer communities, the texts are linked to groups and cultures that, for the most part, remain on the fringes. *Paris is Burning* and *Drag Race* have not actually worked to elevate the status of gender non-normative people at large, or raise them to survivable economic positions. For every one trans woman or man of color who receives some positive recognition in the mainstream, innumerable others are bullied, beaten, rejected, denied health care and housing, or are otherwise brutalized or killed. The number of trans women of color living with HIV and AIDS, and the statistics on homelessness and drug use, make it urgent to look at not just the joys of fringe subcultures, but the abject modes of queer. The object must be to go beyond fetishization or even warm appreciation to making life livable for those for whom it is nearly not.

This goal - to make lives more livable - is why a class intervention into queer studies is just as important as the reverse. Class and queer critiques need one another in order to find the seriousness and corporeal urgency in partying on the queer side of things, and to find joys in

class solidarity and disruptions in class sorrows. Furthermore, these two critical disciplines need one another in order to expand each other's horizons and impact, because they are both significant modes of thinking about motivating resistance.

While marginal and obscure texts might seem better fitted to the task of merging queer and class critique, a great deal of prior work on failure and negativity has used popular and mainstream texts to elucidate the stakes of such concerns. Lee Edelman uses Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds* and Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* to talk about negativity and the death drive as pressures against hetero futurity and "the cult of the child." Likewise, Jack Halberstam shows how a number of Disney and Pixar films, as well as the mainstream live action comedy *Dude, Where's My Car*, represent versions of queer failure. Popular texts rely on the tensions between normative ideology and a pressing and dangerous outside. Adding class critique to a discussion of failure in mainstream texts has the potential to lift veils from oppressions and exploitations that may be missed and made invisible by rejection of certain unpalatable kinds of people. Since these texts tend to center on normative kinds of people, or on people who fill some criterion of mainstream belonging, their main characters are very often posed against non-normative people. Therefore, in these texts, queer and class failures make up a lot of the backdrop of the worlds of normative characters, and are the terms against which they press, in order to form identities as heroes and anti-heroes, or other normal people in not very normal circumstances.

Among television dramas, *Breaking Bad* presents the complexities and nuances of several class identities, which I read here through a lens of queer failure. Queerness, in this exploration, refers simultaneously to non-normative gender and sexual identities, and to the status of lumpen and underclass people as ineligible for inclusion in class collectivity. Members of the underclass

are aligned with queer failure because of their obvious economic failures. Economic success, as I discussed in the previous chapter, is crucial for reproductive heteronormativity. Therefore, lumpen and underclass people are queer in terms of sexuality as well as economics. This chapter looks at *Breaking Bad* as an example of how the capitalist class system is mirrored in the illegal drug trade, in particular the production of crystal methamphetamine, and how moral objections to the drug trade makes it very hard to recognize the highly exploited working-class people within the drug trade. *Breaking Bad* reveals a capitalist structure on the other side of the law, complete with high capitalists and proletarians, involved in an almost vulgar Marxist relationship to one another.

In spite of *Breaking Bad*'s reputation as a show about a working-class anti-hero, Walter White, the main character in *Breaking Bad*, is strongly aligned with the normative, dominant position of white, heterosexual masculinity. As such, he is pitted against various kinds of marginalized people: sexual minorities, people of color, and "illegal" and non-citizen as well as legal immigrants. Additionally, serious methamphetamine and other illicit drug users make up a large part of the population of lumpen people who are exploited or abused by Walter White. The show builds on the dynamics among gender, race, and class positions in order to depict Walter White (the "white" being indicative of the racial codes of the show) as a symbol of faltering middle-class white masculinity scrambling for power by subsuming and exploiting the lives and practices of "hard-living" people.

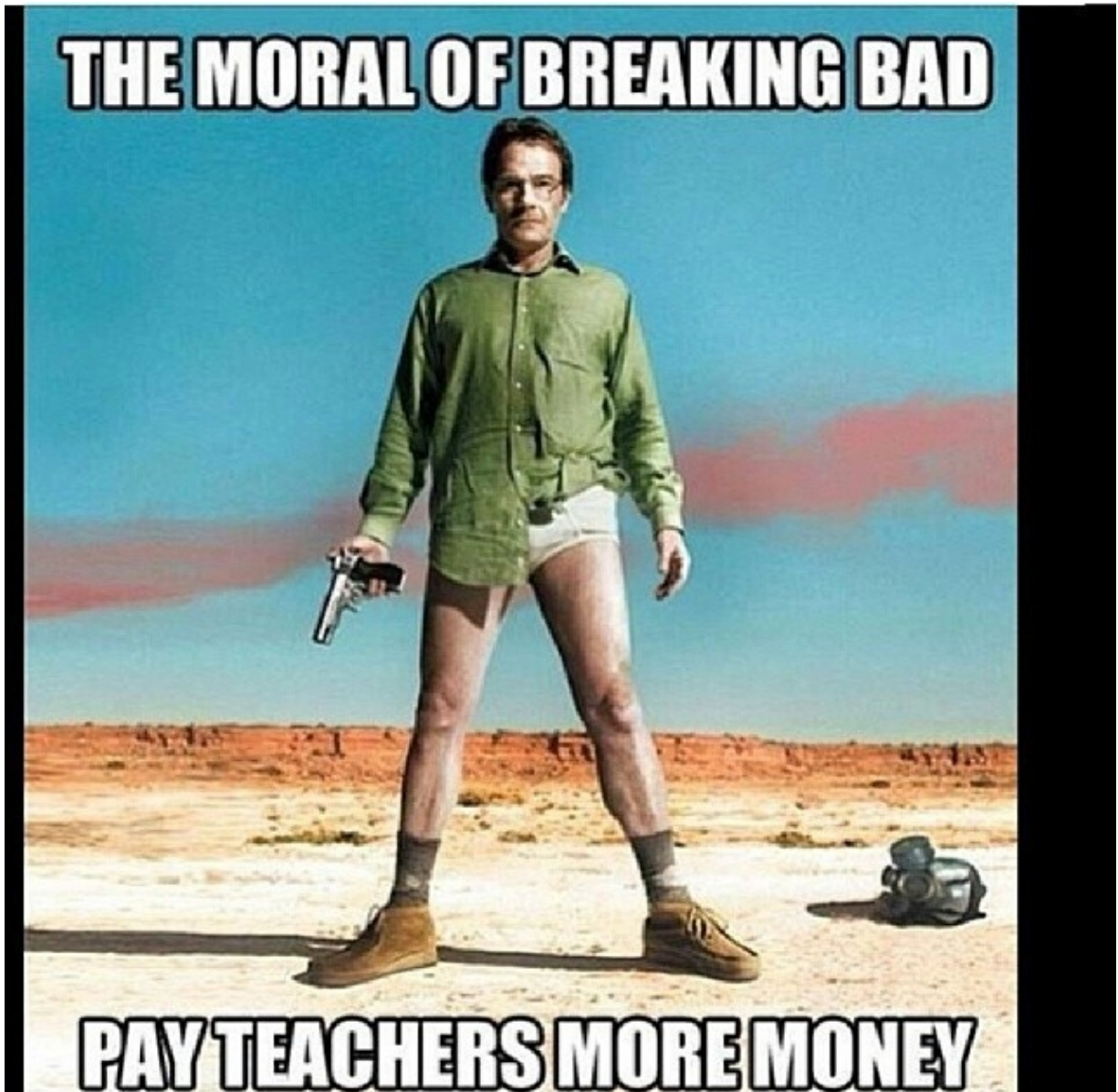


FIGURE 1: *Breaking Bad* meme.

A number of TV critics and a seeming majority of viewers understand Walter White as a good man who makes a “bad decision” out of desperation at learning that he has lung cancer, and gets stuck. John Dioso from *Rolling Stone* describes the show as “chronicling the downward spiral of chem.-teacher-turned-meth-chemist Walt White with its tragic protagonist and dessicated-American-dream setting...” (38). Fans largely speak of Walter White as a failure

because he becomes a criminal, and view his entry into drug manufacturing as his downfall, because of its illegality and the fact that it coincides with his cancer diagnosis. However, his career change is actually a rapid class ascent. His shift to illegal trade is falsely perceived as a downgrade in social status because of the blinding effect of dominant morality. This conflation of moral slippage with economic failure also camouflages the economic stratification in illegal economies, hiding the class exploitations within them. This means that Walter can be perceived as a failure and a loser we can feel sorry for or use to demonstrate how injustice works, while deeply exploited and lumpen people like the show's prostitute character, Wendy, become afterthoughts or comic relief, rather than characters whose experience conveys significant political meaning.

The illusory fear of white masculinity's loss of power has been highlighted in conservative media centers for the past decade or so, contributing to the growing prevalence of anti-immigration sentiment and xenophobia, restrictions on women's reproductive rights, and negligence and apathy regarding rape and rape culture, as well as the growth of men's rights advocacy (MRA) groups that claim that exposing and discussing male violence against women and others constitutes bigotry against men. Specifically, one MRA group online argues, "Men have few or no effective choices in many critical areas of life. They face injustices under the law." Likewise, this group claims that men have been forced into a position of dependence upon women, and need to work to become independent. They seek to help men find freedom "from the notion that as a class they oppress women any more than women as a class oppress them."⁴⁴ Similarly, conservative news pundits such as Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly, who vocalize the conservative trend of incremental denial of liberties for women and minorities, are outspoken about their desire to maintain traditional white, male, cisgender, heterosexual power. It is this

⁴⁴National Free Coalition of Men, main website, "Philosophy." <http://ncfm.org/ncfm-home/philosophy/>

narrative that drives the fantasies of male power that guide many television dramas about men on the rise in legal and illegal enterprises.

Despite its illegality, the drug trade is a highly capitalist endeavor, and though delegitimized by drug laws, nonetheless has a hierarchical, quasi-corporate structure, containing a master class and a proletarian class. That is, it is not a homogeneous murk into which the poor and working-class fall, but a much more complex system of relationships of people to one another and to the production and distribution (and use) of drugs. Its relationship to the law also expresses the stratification of its economy—the proletarians within it bear the brunt of juridical punishment (and harsher by far than that meted out to white collar criminals in supposedly legitimate industries). Michael Woodiwiss explains that the world of crime is not risk-free for any participant, but that the lower classes are the most vulnerable: "America's anti-crime policy since Nixon has been based largely on mass imprisonment for poorer criminals in general, and those involved in a growing drug trade in particular" (10). Additionally, the masculinism of the mainstream legitimate economy is not only mirrored in the drug trade, but also magnified because it has not been shaped feminism and other social equity projects.

Departing from my analysis in the previous chapter, I will not attempt to show the resistive potential for proletarian failures within the drug trade. However, while I do not see political resistance enacted in drug culture widely or substantially, I perceive a resistive potential in scholarly and activist attention to the proletariat's role in drug culture. Taking a non-moralizing look at working-class people in the drug trade opens up possibilities for understanding capitalism's exploitations across legitimate and illegitimate economies. "Just Say No" logic reiterates simple, individual moral responsibility for problems that befall the poor, and when scholars of the working class take the position that the drug trade is merely the territory of

irresponsible, bad people, they deny the exploitation experienced at the hands of the capitalist class within the drug trade. Likewise, it is well-known that the drug trade can be an attractive option for poor and lumpen people who have few other sources of income. Similarly, drug addiction, while it affects all classes, is harder to overcome for the poor, because treatment costs money, as does moving out of neighborhoods and communities that are rife with drug activity.

Resistance to looking at the drug trade in a head-on, non-moralizing and analytical way is understandable. Drug-addicted people are generally desperate and employ the behavior of desperate people. Generally speaking, life in the illicit drug world is toxic. Anthropologist Philippe Bourgois notes in his study of homeless heroin addicts that "life among homeless injectors is often emotionally challenging. They are embroiled in a politically-imposed suffering that manifests in an everyday interpersonal violence of intimate aggression and betrayal that can be destructive for them and disorienting and alienating for an outsider" ("Lumpen Abuse..."5). While Jack Metzgar writes about the "maladapted" as being as charming and compelling as they are dangerous in his moralistic argument for valuing what he calls the "cultural repertoire" of the working-class, Bourgois, along with documentary photographer Jeff Schonberg, reveals the day-to-day lives of homeless heroin users as anything but so romantic. Bourgois and Schonberg work to avoid moral judgment of their subjects by organizing the book around what they call "lumpen abuse," which has to do with the violence of structural power relations and "symbolic violence" as defined by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourgois writes, "The suffering of homeless heroin injectors is chronic and cumulative and is best understood as a politically structured phenomenon that encompasses multiple abusive relationships, both structural and personal" (*Righteous* 16). Additionally, Bourgois argues that homeless drug users "survive in perpetual crisis" (15). The

suffering, pain, and abuse experienced by the maladapted, hard-living poor are missing from Metzgar's assessments.

Addiction is an alienating, often violent and aggressive way of life, and it is logical for the tactically self-preserving to avoid drug life even if the ability to maintain significant distance from it is indicative of a certain level of privilege. *Breaking Bad* expresses this in brief but powerful portrayals of families and bystanders without this privilege who are killed or who suffer loss because of their proximity to drug culture, and because of the actions of the powerful within the drug economy, usually Walter White. In the structure of the show, Walter White is a lumpen abuser, since lumpen abuse, as well as other underclass abuses, underlies his actions over the course of the show.

Breaking Bad's focus on drug culture identifies anxiety, one of the most prominent affects of contemporary life, as both contributing to drug culture and being aggravated by it. As the Institute for Precarious Consciousness (IPC) explains in "Six Theses on Anxiety and the Prevention of Militancy," "in contemporary capitalism, the dominant reactive affect is anxiety...Anxiety has spread from its previous localised locations (such as sexuality) to the whole of the social field" (6). Whereas before people experienced anxiety in relation to specific social taboos, in particular, sexual identity, anxiety has now become an affective response to every element of social, cultural, and economic life. As the IPC suggests, the awareness of being persistently under surveillance creates a constant internal anxiety, which we assuage by surveilling and criminalizing others. In this way, working-class people contribute to the demonization of working and lower-class people who are different, or perceived as dangerous (and too close in proximity).

Surveillance is part and parcel of the dominance of anxiety as public affect, and it is in many ways, as the IPC argues, cause of much of the anxiety experienced by the masses. As they claim, "anxiety is the linchpin of subordination" (6), and moralism is linked to subordination, stemming from, as I see it, anxiety. This may be particularly the case for moralism that persists on the *left*, because it has been so obscured by the hegemony-building strategies of the right. If moralism is linked to anxiety, it is exercised through an intrinsic fear that moral slips lead to loss or destitution of property or of self. Capitalist surveillance treats people as disposable, and the result of its operation is to marginalize those who are, in capital's view, highly disposable, or even already disposed of. Moralizing working-class people futilely wish to avoid being grouped in with those considered disposable and to imagine themselves as less subject to surveillance, even perhaps in the panoptic position instead.

Breaking Bad centers on prevailing social anxieties: about loss and death, about family and marriage, about good and evil. It questions what desperate people are capable of when they don't have a safety net in times of economic depression. Attached to these concerns, but perhaps less visible, is the show's examination of the anxieties of white masculinity and who and what it exploits. From the beginning, Walter White is confronted with challenges to his masculine power; he and his brother-in-law vie for dominance within the family, his wife and son are outspoken and insubordinate, and his students and co-workers do not recognize or revere his intellect. When he enters the drug trade, he reclaims a more traditional masculine role, but he continues always to vie with other white men for dominance.

Although the show conveys Walt's economic upward mobility more than a "downward spiral," it is worth talking about the ways in which the show handles the contemporary topics of the diminishing regard for educators, health care, and the circumstances of the working class in

general. Walter White, as a high school chemistry teacher, represents, for many, the general harshness of the economy and the specific devaluing of educators in the country. Teachers in the past decades have been devalued and reviled by large swaths of the American public. Teachers have been blamed for the failures of students, a problem actually caused by decreasing funding to education and the consequent diminishing resources of public schools. Teachers' unions have been demonized by Republican and Democratic politicians as "greedy and self-serving," and have been called "political *thugs*" by Chris Christie, governor of New Jersey (McCartin 48, emphasis mine). Understanding *Breaking Bad* as a representation of the breaking down of an exploited and devalued educator is useful, because the contemporary economic struggles of educators are frequently ignored in favor of sentimental or ominous representations of teacher-student dynamics in the classroom, such as *Stand and Deliver*, or *Freedom Writers*.

The conservative mythology with regard to teachers and teachers' unions is also part of the scapegoating of public workers as overpaid and underworked in comparison to private sector workers. Over the decades since the Reagan administration's successful efforts to stifle union power, public workers' unions have been scapegoated as "'a new privileged class'" who receive special treatment, despite the idea, as Rush Limbaugh says, that they "don't produce anything" (McCartin 49). The last decade's prolonged (and not waning) recession also makes scapegoating unions easy, because "pressing government workers to surrender some of their salary and benefits at this moment offers a path of least political resistance that requires less political will and vision than building an economy that lifts up private sector workers" (McCartin 50). Because there is such political demonization of teachers and unions in the media, both overt and underhanded (representations of dedicated, "good" teachers as rare, effective gems, rather than

typical, but ill-treated), we should seek out critiques of the poor treatment of teachers as ways of thinking about solving the problem of public education wherever we can.

Walt, as an educator, is portrayed as hugely underappreciated as well as underpaid and underinsured. Walter feels cheated and degraded by his status as a teacher, and does not seem to care that teachers in general are undervalued within the public school system. The feminization of teaching is also a problem, and the show underscores this by showing Walt in a teaching cohort of primarily women. However valuable the show's critique of the mistreatment of teachers may be, education reform is not the main purpose of the show, and Walter White is not a representative of the teacher struggle. Most importantly, the show does not convey in any sustained way the relationship between teachers and the schools they work in. Part of the poor perception of public school teachers is the misconception that teachers have significant agency in their work: "Teachers are wrongly perceived as fully empowered to make all educational decisions" (Givan 72). Teachers are envisioned as working free from the structure of educational administration and curriculum building that actually constrains their work and impedes their input and abilities. This is where *Breaking Bad* really doesn't do justice to the plight of teachers. Walter's relationship to the broader collective of teachers and administrators is barely indicated, except in a few small scenes of his interactions with Carmen Molina, the vice-principal of his school, who is introduced primarily as an unwitting sex object for Walt.⁴⁵

The only other school employee shown is Hugo Archuleta, the janitor who provides small acts of tender care to Walter when he gets sick in the bathroom from the effects of chemotherapy. Hugo later takes the fall for missing chemistry lab items that Walter has stolen, and is subsequently unjustly demonized in a PTA meeting about the thefts at the school. Notably,

⁴⁵ He is eventually asked to leave because he has been absent and distracted, and he attempts to kiss Carmen in her office as she explains to him the concerns about his performance.

this incident is not followed by a banding together of teachers to stand up for their colleague, nor is it revisited in the classroom as a discussion between teachers and students. Hugo is fired, and, while the diegetic framework holds Hugo as an empathetic character who has been betrayed, his dismissal is not presented as a failure of solidarity. Racial prejudice and moral assumptions based on Hugo's revealed prior incarceration are, importantly, made clear as factors in his mistreatment, but the need for collective workplace politics to protect workers from injustices like this are not.

As Givan argues, "The image of the individual teacher in the classroom has enabled the demonizers to hold teachers solely responsible for the educational attainment of their students" (72). Truly, the classroom and the school serve mostly as a contrasting backdrop for Walt's individualist pursuits. While in general I am suspicious of the perpetual return to the idea of a homogenous working class value system, when it comes to effective labor politics, occupational exigencies are best served by collective action and representation. *Breaking Bad's* potential for political statement on behalf of educators is stunted by Walt's individualism and disconnection from his colleagues and occupation.

In spite of the limits of *Breaking Bad's* examination of the labor politics of education, the series leaves room to perceive Walt as exploited by capitalism and to expand upon the nuance of his character through a lens of labor and class issues. Walt is undoubtedly a master of the subject he teaches, and as shown in the classroom in the pilot episode, presents the material with passion when he is well, to a room of students who are barely aware of him. His presentation of the material to the class reflects the kind of passion we see in the filmic trope of the teacher-savior, who successfully encourages underprivileged students to dream of better lives, except that his

efforts appear ineffectual.⁴⁶ Seeing someone who ought to be able to reach a classroom fall flat in front of a mass of students might help repair ideas about teachers as "glorified babysitters" (itself a devaluation of the typically female-gendered occupation of child care) and laze-about who don't really work.

We also see Walt in the classroom after the first episode, only when he is experiencing the effects of chemotherapy, feeling ill and losing his train of thought, or rushing away to the restroom. Walt's illness shows teachers as human and vulnerable, certainly not "overbenefited" as those who deride public workers suggest, as well as devoted, since one might say that even illness won't stop him from getting to work. Walter in the classroom, separate from his actions and motivations outside the school, presents a relatively sympathetic view of the plight of a public school teacher. However, the school and the educational system are simply not the focus of the show. His backstory as an important chemical researcher and co-founder of a company called Gray Matter, which I will examine more closely, makes his position as an educator a "last resort" occupation, and a shameful outcome for someone of his education and intellect. To be a teacher, in Walter's formulation, is to be a failure. Though my analysis prizes queer and class failure as an entry point for critical analysis, I won't spend time on the ways failure might work to ignite occupational or labor solidarity. Suffice it to say that educational reform is not a sustained diegetic focus of *Breaking Bad*.

In addition to its scanty treatment of education and teachers' work conditions, the show also skims the subject of health care in the United States. That Walter's health insurance is too poor to cover the cost of chemotherapy is significant and, of course, culturally topical. It reflects the reality of our broken health care system, and I don't want to discount or lessen the importance

⁴⁶ *Freedom Writers, Lean on Me, Dangerous Minds, Music of the Heart, The Class*, to name a few.

of that message. Walt is a senior teacher at his high school, and one who is seemingly overqualified. He has the highest level of education and expertise in his field, yet his insurance does not cover the cost of his cancer treatment. The injustice of Walter's situation is made clear in numerous camera close-ups on Walter's fingers fumbling to write and pass along a check to the hospital receptionist, and quietly requesting that she "not cash this until Monday." However, this situation is another red herring, obscuring Walt's real, more normative, anti-progressive motivation, which is to reclaim his dominance as a white, heterosexual man. Throughout the series, he pursues his capitalist reascension through the production and branding of his crystal methamphetamine business. He's a venture capitalist, trying to regain his masculinity through this risky economic endeavor.

Reading Walt as victim of systemic injustice drives some to consider Walt a working-class hero or anti-hero. Ignorance of lumpen abuse and disregard of the capitalist processes in illegal industry exacerbate this myopia. The definition of "working-class" I most often employ is, for the most part, in line with Michael Zweig's definition, which itself is a basic Marxist definition: those who do not own the means of production are the working class, and this simple distinction includes the poor and the lower echelons of the drug trade represented on *Breaking Bad*. Despite the fact that I am generally more concerned with underclass and lumpen people, understanding the Marxist division between the capitalist class and the working class is necessary for understanding Walter's role as a capitalist over and against the myriad underclass people who are subordinated within the structure of capitalism.

Educators are not generally considered a part of the working class; they are not traditional manual laborers, and teachers' level of education has historically been a signpost of economic

privilege. In the original edition of *The Working-Class Majority*, Zweig categorizes teachers as part of the professional class because of their dominion in the classroom. However, recent times have given light to the severe exploitations of educators, especially adjunct faculty in universities and teachers' unions in public schools. In the introduction to the 2012 edition of the book, Zweig explains, "When I talk about class, I am talking about power. Power at work, and power in the larger society. Economic power, and also political and cultural power...the contours of power that operate in every aspect of society, to the benefit of some, to the burden of others" (1). His conception of power has to do with who owns the means of production, not with income, specifically. As he poses his main thesis that most of the population of the United States can be categorized as working class, he further explains, "[F]or all their differences, working class people share a common place in production, where they have relatively little control over the pace or content of their work, and aren't anybody's boss" (3). That is, anyone who does not own the means of production and who must sell their labor for wages is working class. In this sense, the majority of Americans can be categorized as working-class. Because of the valence of power in Zweig's conception, he also includes the very poor in what he calls the working class, even if they do not hold legitimate jobs. This simple dichotomy has also been effective/valuable in class-related activism in recent years. Specifically, the economic disparity between the 99% and the 1% was a powerful point of reference driving the Occupy Wall Street Movement and the related Occupy demonstrations around the nation since 2011.

The simplicity of Zweig's Marxist conceptions makes class solidarity seem more possible and powerful, since most of us belong to the underclasses and there is power in numbers. However, I also contend that within Zweig's working-class majority, there are significant differences in material comfort and privilege that can create fissures. Furthermore, the privileges

afforded to cultural normativity also contribute to capitalist potential. Walter White has a great deal, materially speaking, despite his working-class occupation as a public school teacher and part-time car wash employee. He and his family live in a large, well-kept, ranch-style home with a backyard pool that is full and apparently maintained. He, his wife Skyler, who is pregnant in the first season, and his son Walter, Jr., who has cerebral palsy, are all well-dressed, well-groomed, and well-educated. They are a two-car—two SUV, in fact—family. Walter begins the series, then, as a kind of privileged “precariat,” because he persists in “a condition of existence without predictability or security, affecting material or psychological welfare.” Then, not far into the movement of the series, Walt becomes a high capitalist, who remains somewhat precarious because of his criminal nature.

On *Breaking Bad*, it is virtually impossible to disentangle Walter White's reclamation of his “proper place” in the capitalist system from a reclamation of masculine power. *Breaking Bad* is among numerous contemporary television dramas that portray male figures “re-empowering” themselves through primarily capitalistic endeavors. *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos*, and a number of other shows that have appeared in what one journalist and critic refers to as the “Third Golden Age,” all deal with “difficult men” “alternately setting loose and struggling to cage their wildest natures,” which “has always been the great American story” (Martin 84). White masculinity in particular has held, not without contention, primacy as a cultural position of power. Gail Bederman, in *Manliness and Civilization*, works to explain “what was happening to middle-class manhood at the turn of the century, and why the middle class believed manhood needed to be remade”(5). In the years after abolition, as Bederman suggests, “a variety of social and cultural factors encouraged white middle-class men to develop new explanations of why they, as men,

ought to wield power and authority" (5). What makes a man, according to Gail Bederman, are "historical and ideological [processes]" that shift and move over the course of time and differ from place to place and from group to group. Likewise, as Bederman explains, though masculinity is enmeshed with capitalist thriving, what constitutes mastery within capitalism changes over time, based on varying factors: "In the context of the market economy's unpredictability, a manly character built on high-minded self-restraint was seen as the rock on which middle-class men could build their fortunes" (12), but at other times, risk was the realm of masculine expression, and financial risk was an ideal manner of engaging with money and capital accumulation. Walter White inhabits a bit of both positions within what I call, drawing on Bederman's analysis, capitalist masculinity. He risks the cheating of other drug capitalists, imprisonment, and death, but he spends very little compared to what he accumulates by the end.

Likewise, the discourse of the "civilized" has continued to accompany the discourse of white masculinity. "American civilization" especially has been defined according to white masculinity. As Bederman explains, there were "a multitude of ways middle-class Americans found to explain male supremacy in terms of white racial dominance and, conversely, to explain white supremacy in terms of male power" (4). Bederman's history begins in the generation after abolition, and traces the trajectory for a very American contention around what it means to be a man, and how the hierarchies of manhood and manliness were classed and raced. Though the specific character of masculinity has shifted over time, the present day crisis of middle-class white masculinity represented on *Breaking Bad* and other shows about "difficult men" result from this longstanding set of cultural tensions.

The most significant part of Walter's backstory, one that provides an explanation both for his talent as a chemist and for his sense of entitlement to something better, is his history with the

chemistry company called Gray Matter. Early in the first season, Walter has multiple flashbacks to his days as a graduate student and his relationship with a woman named Gretchen. It is then revealed that Walter had been forced out of Gray Matter by his business partner, Elliott Schwartz, who then married his lover Gretchen, and became a Nobel Prize winner and a millionaire. This backstory is further developed when he and Skyler attend Schwartz's (presumably his 50th, since the series begins on Walter's 50th birthday as well) birthday party. A friend of Schwartz introduces Walter to another man, explaining that Walter is "the white in Gray Matter." Walter elaborates, "Schwartz, black, and White, mixed together make gray." Here, Walter and Elliott are set up in a Western-style black hat versus white hat contention. Between the two of them, Elliott has been the "bad guy," who took Walter's life and love from him and ran off with the loot. This opposition becomes ironized and complicated when Walter becomes a successful entrepreneur on the other side of the law. A false dichotomy between good and evil is created here, when really Walt and Elliott are the same kind of man, motivated by similar ideals of masculine success through wealth accumulation and name recognition.

Arriving at the party, Walt and Skyler walk in, and are immediately aware that they are dressed poorly for the occasion. Walt wears an out-of-style double-breasted jacket with bright gold buttons, and Skyler wears a bunchy blue dress that she complains looks like a prom dress. They look like they are dressed as wealthy people for a costume party, or are guests on *The Love Boat*. One cringes at the awkwardness of their displacement here, and Walt's anger and discomfort are perceptible in this moment. Later, Walter enters the Schwartz home by himself and gasps at the beauty of the library within. As he admires the wood-trimmed shelves and spiral staircase, he stops at a framed photo of Elliott Schwartz in a two-page spread in *Forbes* magazine. Walter's face turns from admiration to anger. Walter believes, and is more than likely

right, that Schwartz's success is built upon research that Walter did, and that it was his intellectual work that made Gray Matter successful and lucrative.

Because it is implied that Walter was forced out of Gray Matter by Elliott, it is immediately understandable that Walter is disgusted by the offer for Walter to come work for Gray Matter. "We have excellent health insurance," Elliott tells Walter in a private conversation. Immediately, Walter realizes that Skyler has told Elliott about his cancer, and that this is an act of charity. It is a direct insult to Walter, since the audience is to understand that Elliott's actions have deprived Walter of a status as co-president of Gray Matter, and therefore of his own entrepreneurial celebrity and wealth. It's also hinted at that Walter's cancer is a result of laboratory work early in his career—possibly that which structured the foundation of Gray Matter and made Elliott rich and put him on the cover of *Forbes* magazine. Here, Elliott deepens the betrayal, by offering Walter charity from a company that should have been his. Schwartz outmans Walter here by putting himself in the position of provider to Walt, who is placed in the position of need.

In a third season flashback, Walter and Skyler view their home before they buy it. Walt is still young and confident, though he is likely no longer involved with Gray Matter. In this scene, while Skyler is very interested in the house, Walter feels it is too small for their future family, with only three bedrooms. Skyler informs Walt that it's the best house in their price range, to which Walt replies that they should then merely "expand" their price range: "We've got nowhere to go but up." Herein it is evident that Walt has expectations about his economic circumstances that go along with his status as a middle-class, educated, white heterosexual man. As he boasts about his economic potential, he has Skyler, pregnant, pinned against the wall—his sexual conquest. This is not to suggest that only white heterosexual men want or even plan to be

wealthy. Rather, his arrogance and assumption of entitlement point to his privileged position. When he insists that they will need at least five bedrooms, he likewise implies a reproductive heterosexual virility that warrants his economic entitlement. This flashback is another instance pinpointing Walter's longstanding sense of entitlement. Masculinity as it is tied to sexual virility and wealth is what Walter wishes to reclaim, not health or even continued life. Walt's epiphany about the drug trade and crime as a way to reclaim this position also precedes the revelation that he has cancer.

A close analysis of the pilot episode sets up the series' persistent trope of emasculation and reclaimed masculinity. Like every subsequent episode in the first season of *Breaking Bad*, the pilot begins near the end of the episode's story. In this case, Walter is standing in the desert in his underwear, crying, as he makes a home video of himself on the side of a broken down RV, saying goodbye to his family, as though he is about to die. He then walks out into the center of the roadway pointing a sizable handgun (likely a 40 caliber gun), toward the sound of sirens coming from a distance. In this scene, viewers are destabilized by an unexplained crisis at its climax: an "ordinary" man who is very evidently in a place he does not belong, a place of mortal danger, at a point in the very center of a transformation of character. On the one hand, he's emasculated. He's weeping into the camera, certain of his imminent death, and exposed to the elements of the desert, because he has lost his pants. On the other, however, he has taken a masculine stance, literally and figuratively, by standing in the very center of the road alone (again, in Lone Ranger, cowboy style), pointing a large phallic object toward the invisible forces that seemingly seek to take him out. The episode returns to this scene again near the end, taking this point of transformation to its full end.

Throughout the pilot episode, Walter is shown as perpetually emasculated in each facet of his life. It is the morning of Walter's 50th birthday. Skyler, his wife, has made him a birthday breakfast, with the number fifty done in bacon - but the bacon doesn't look quite right. Skyler explains that it is veggie bacon: "Zero cholesterol; you won't even taste the difference." When Walter picks up the veggie bacon, it flops over, completely limp. As a staple of masculine consumption, bacon is a stand in, in a sense, for phallic power. Skyler has replaced Walt's crisp, erect, "real" bacon for an impotent imposter. Not only has she infantilized him with her childish breakfast presentation, but she's also castrated him by giving him limp, phony meat. Shortly thereafter, the Whites' son, Walter, Junior, who has cerebral palsy, comes into the room and does not hesitate to demand "real" bacon. Here, there's an almost Oedipal overtaking of the phallic power in the family dynamic, wherein the son is able to make demands that the father is not.⁴⁷

In the next scene, Walter is in front of a class of bored chemistry students, on what seems to be the first day of class. In addition to the fact that, traditionally, teaching has been considered a feminine occupation, Walter appears to be particularly unpopular as a teacher, and his students do not appear to respect him. As Walter begins to speak to the class about chemistry as "the study of change," reflecting on the larger metaphor of his character's transformation over the course of the show, his passion for the subject is palpable. He gesticulates with his hands as he explains how matter changes through chemistry, and as he sprays the flame from a Bunsen burner with different chemicals, changing the color and character of the flame, he concludes, "That's all of life...it's fascinating, really," and clasps his hands in front of his chest like a Disney princess singing about her prince. The pure passion of Walt in this scene is itself a kind of

⁴⁷ Walter Junior is played by actor RJ Mitte, who has cerebral palsy. The actor's condition contributes to the emasculation of Walt, since his offspring here is also not fully capable of phallic power by way of disability. Walt never says as much, but indicates the insufficiency of Walter Junior as an heir to his legacy, and takes on Jesse Pinkman as his son and heir.

reflection of Walt's feminization. It is emotion, not intellect, that he conveys here. This emotionality links to his crying in the first scene of the episode, and is a characteristic Walt loses fairly rapidly as he attains status as a drug manufacturer. Though a couple of students nod to one another, impressed by the fireshow, most of the class is not paying attention: some students look down at their desks, another has his mouth agape and is staring at the ceiling. The disrespect of Walt's students is concretized when he calls out a young couple who are canoodling and speaking to one another at full volume, as though they are unaware of where they are. When Walter asks the young man, Chad, to return to his table, Chad does so, loudly dragging his chair across the classroom floor and staring Walter down as he goes. It's a fairly evident masculine challenge, and Walter loses to Chad in this scene and the next.

This classroom scene immediately precedes another, which portrays Walter at his part time job at a car wash owned by an eastern immigrant named Bogdan.⁴⁸ Bogdan asks Walter to leave the register to wipe down cars. As he is wiping a car, he realizes that the car belongs to the same male student who had disrespected him in class. The camera angle shows Walter in the extreme foreground, wiping down the rim of the tire, while Chad and his girlfriend, towering over Walter, laugh. This confrontation adds insult to injury, as he is exposed as economically vulnerable and is berated and treated like a servant by his student, a teenager who has bested him in contest for dominance twice in one day.

Walter's day is highlighted by a surprise birthday party. When he walks in the door, he's already been repeatedly defeated, so he fairly unsurprisingly appears deflated by the shouts of surprise by the roomful of people invited by Skyler. The focus quickly shifts to Walter's brother-in-law, Drug Enforcement Agency officer Hank Schrader, who is holding court with the rest of

⁴⁸ This becomes significant later in the series when Walt and Skyler, with the help of Saul Goodman, trick Bogdan into selling the carwash to them for the purpose of laundering Walt's drug money.

the male attendees in the living room. Hank pulls out his Glock 22 handgun and passes it to Walter Junior to hold, bragging, "If you gonna bring a gun, baby, you gotta bring *enough* gun. 40 caliber!" Walter, Junior, is impressed and tilts the gun back and forth in his grip, admiring it. He prods his father to hold the gun, and to try out the feel of it. Walt hesitates, but eventually takes it, noticeably surprised by the heft of it, as his arm dips from the weight. "It's heavy," he offers. "That's why they hire *men*," Hank chides, as the room breaks out in laughter at Walt's expense. Here, Walter is emasculated by other men in his own home; he is called a woman in front of his wife and son, and he is proven unable to handle the weight of the object of phallic power, the gun. Hank further diminishes Walt in his own home, by commanding the room to be quiet, and turning the television on to a local news report in which he is being interviewed about a meth lab bust.

The news camera pans over boxes of rolled up money, which immediately gets Walter's attention. With his eyes wide as plates, Walt asks, "Hank, how much money is that?" It's about 700 grand," Hank tells him, unimpressed and nonchalant about the number. "Easy money, 'til we catch ya!" Walt continues to eye the money on the screen with detectable longing. It's important to note that Walt's interest in this mode of money-making comes before his cancer diagnosis. The scene in the doctor's office wherein he learns he has lung cancer is not until the next day. While his illness may be his excuse, it is not the catalyst for his interest in earning money through meth production.

The day ends with Walter in bed with Skyler, who is giving him a half-hearted handjob, talking to his penis like an infant, and simultaneously bidding on ebay. Walter cannot maintain an erection (he's again unable to handle the weight of the gun), but Skyler appears to climax, shouting YES! YES! YES! – she's won the bidding war on eBay. Her sexual-economic

satisfaction is displaced—from him to some invisible seller. Money is the sexual victor, and Walt proceeds from this day to reclaim that power and position.

Walter's 50th birthday unfolds like a sequence of punches in the gut for a thoroughly disempowered, emasculated man. Continuing the assault on his manhood, the next day, he passes out at the carwash after gazing at a beautiful woman in a tight-fitting dress. He wakes up in an ambulance, and after being admitted to the hospital, discovers that he has lung cancer. This scene occurs about 40 minutes into the first episode, after the sequence of humiliations that occur in Walt's day. From here, he is changed and changing, from dethroned patriarch to a self-made alpha dog.

James Messerschmidt points out that poor and working-class men engage in criminal behavior of the violent and non-violent varieties in order to acquire masculine status in a milieu in which the "breadwinner" role is difficult to reach. In exploring research on street gangs in St. Louis, Messerschmidt writes,

Unemployed and marginalized men seek adventurous situations that include demonstrations to engage in crime. These men adopt the cultural and contextual expectations of masculinity to guide their behavior, turning "masculine posturing up a notch in appropriate circumstances" (299), and they engage in deliberations with each other that imply criminal ability and interact with groups of men whose potential for crime is high. (4)⁴⁹

Though the men in the study are men of color in "high crime" neighborhoods in the poorer parts of St. Louis, their masculine posturing is like Walter White's as he enters the criminal world. Significantly, Walter is concerned at the beginning and throughout the series with establishing

⁴⁹ Messerschmidt quotes criminologist Christopher Mullins' study of St. Louis street gangs in the book *Holding Your Square: Masculinities, Streetlife, and Violence*.

himself as criminally able. Over time, his appearance becomes more hardened, though his wardrobe, aside from his signature "Heisenberg" hat, becomes more purposefully nondescript. He shaves his head because of his chemotherapy treatment, but the effect of the baldness is that he looks decidedly more threatening.

I have detailed the sequence of this first episode to assert that it is not Walter's cancer and its associated health and economic hardship that lead him to this supposed "bad decision" to cook methamphetamine. Rather, the diagnosis is the "last straw" event—the culminating loss of masculine power. His inability to be the master of any domain, including his own body and health (significantly, he's a non-smoker, so it's not even that his own choices led him to this state), is what moves him to seek this position of power. At the end of the very first episode, after Walter has made his first foray into the drug trade, he begins to display capitalist masculinity, which is evidenced through a couple of key actions. He asks Hank if he can ride along on a raid of a meth lab, and witnesses his former student and future partner Jesse Pinkman climbing out an upper level window in the house next door to the lab. He follows Pinkman to his home and blackmails him into including him in the production of methamphetamine, "Or I turn you in."

Jesse purchases an RV with Walt's money, and they cook their first batch of meth, the purity of which Jesse celebrates: "This is glass grade. Jesus, you got crystals in here two inches, three inches long! This is glass. You're a god damn artist! This is art!" They then try to sell to a dealer named Crazy 8, who, along with his cousin Emilio, tries to steal the batch and the RV. Walt is scared, but he is able to outman the two by exposing them to toxic fumes and driving away with the RV, with Jesse and the two other dealers passed out. As we learn later, one man

has died, and the other will have to die soon in order for Walter to live. This is where the scene in the beginning starts. His pants, which he has taken off in order to keep himself from "smelling like a meth lab," a concern which makes Pinkman repeatedly refer to him as a "faggot," have blown away from the side of the RV, and he stands alone in the street with the gun, awaiting the arrival of police, who he assumes are on their way because he hears the blare of sirens. He points the gun toward the sound, then puts the gun in his mouth and *pulls the trigger*. The safety is on, and he is spared a fatal shot through the head. It is accidental that he has not committed suicide on the side of the road. But it is also here that Walt loses his fear of the gun and becomes able to handle and control the phallic object. Hereafter, he is essentially fearless in his masculinity.

After facing death and reclaiming the phallic power of the gun in the desert, Walter begins to express himself as a dominant male. He attacks a teenaged boy who bullies his son in a clothing store, kicking him repeatedly in the leg, then daring the boy to retaliate. This is a deeply satisfying moment, but one indicative of a surge of violence associated with some traditional notions of masculinity freshly realized in Walter. This scene undoes the oedipal formation for the time being, as Walter steps in to protect his son from cruelty. Likewise, the sex scenes with Skyler after he has made excellent meth and caused someone to die are in sharp contrast with the first sex scene, showing Walt as again virile and dominant, as he was when he and Skyler first bought their home and had a bright economic future. With these acts, Walter begins to reclaim his "proper" patriarchal position in the household and family formation. The transformation is not total, however. The first season portrays him fighting off his "weaker" side at times, but the masculine, dominant, Walt wins out in each occasion, unfettered by ethics or scruples. This masculinity is continually represented as tied in utterly with the money he makes. The more money he acquires, the more he exhibits the signs of traditional machismo. He shows the baby

his cash stash and says, "Daddy made that. Daddy did that." This moment of reproductivity enjambed with capitalist accumulation moves Walt from pseudo-failure to masculine success story.

The manner in which Walter seeks to regain capitalist masculinity is through the illegal drug trade. The structure of the world of drugs and drug use mirrors legitimate capitalism. There are, within the drug trade, a working class and a capitalist class, and often the same people occupy these positions in both economies. While the law engenders some distinctions between illegal and legal trade, and while I discuss the drug trade here as a unique instantiation of capitalism, it is not totally separate from the free market in form, function, or ubiquity. While the show, and large sections of this analysis, focus on Walter White, peeling back the layers of Walt's foray into the drug trade reveals the persistent exploitation of the "hard living."

Here, it's helpful to think of the drug trade as a part of organized crime, a phenomenon long associated with capitalist drives. Michael Woodiwiss in *Gangster Capitalism: The United States and the Global Rise of Organized Crime*, suggests that the United States economy itself is criminal in nature. What Woodiwiss suggests is that corporations in the United States that control the economy conduct illegal business regularly, but are protected from consequence by their wealth and their status as legitimate business. He writes, "The United States tells other nations and international organizations, notably the United Nations, how to control organized crime at the same time as so much of its business activity can be defined as simple racketeering" (1). Since racketeering refers to any consistent illegal extortion of money or illegal business, drugs fall right in. Woodiwiss points out that the most notable racket of the early twentieth-century period of mafia activity was the sale of alcohol during prohibition. Illicit, addictive intoxicants have a guaranteed market, and the appeal to racketeers is evident. The racketeering

quality of legitimate capital is displayed in the intermingling of what looks like "legitimate" business with drug sales. Walt and Skyler's success in purchasing the A-1 Car Wash with Walt's drug money (which they tell Hank and his wife was earned gambling) indicates the manner in which the illegal undergirds the legal in the capitalist enterprise.

One of the biggest contentions between Walter and Jesse in the early stages of their partnership comes from Walter's inability to perceive how the methamphetamine market is structured. When they capture and hold Domingo "Crazy 8" Tampico hostage in Jesse's basement, Jesse must explain that Crazy 8 is at a higher level in the drug trade than himself. He likens the system to Starbucks, telling Walt that if he is Starbucks, then Crazy 8 is "like where you get the coffee beans." "Oh, he's a *distributor*," replies Walt, understanding the reference utterly. And throughout the show, the likeness of the drug trade to mainstream retail supply chains and capitalist business structures is persistently emphasized.⁵⁰

As even higher-level meth "executives" enter the picture, the personalities that participate in larger manufacturing and distribution activities stand out as extreme and violent. Tuco Salamanca, his uncle Hector, the hired cousins that come for Walter and shoot Hank, and Gustavo Fring are all sociopaths. However, the stand-out sociopath of the program is Walter White. Walter's antagonism can fly under the radar because he is the central character of the program. However, as the series progresses, the hints about Walter's nature become more and more evident. When Skyler expresses deep worry for the safety of the family against "a knock at the door" of a killer, Walter announces, "I am the danger. I am the one who knocks." In this, Walter claims to be more frightening, dangerous, powerful, and likely to kill than all of the drug dealers and cartel killers introduced on the show thus far. The assertion that he is "the danger"

⁵⁰ The same phenomenon is shown on *The Wire*. Both police and drug dealers continually reference mid and lower-level "players," as well as the existence of a supply chain, wherein heroin is brought in either at the docks (the focus of season 2) or from New York City.

and "the one who knocks" resonates with two ideals of masculinity that are sometimes at odds. The danger present is in Walt as the looming figure—a strong, virile body that enacts its power through physical violence—and as a colonialist conqueror, intruding upon another's territory, with the claim of spreading "civilization" (Bederman 5, 15).

Another indication of the porousness of the barrier between legal and illegal capitalist formations comes through in the near-invisibility of Gustavo Fring's methamphetamine empire, which is dismantled by Walt. Fring's success as a legitimate businessman is precisely what allows his drug enterprise to persist and expand. He owns multiple Los Pollos Hermanos restaurants, which are a household name in the Albuquerque area. It is not merely that Fring's laundry warehouse is the site and cover for the behemoth meth lab Walt and Jesse come to work in, or that transport of the illicit product is contained in the transport of fry batter for the Los Pollos Hermanos chicken. Rather, the main indicator of the inextricability of the legitimate and illegitimate economies is that the big players, that is, high-level capitalists, have their fingers in both pies, so to speak.

Similarly, the heroin trade represented on HBO's *The Wire* is a smartly organized hierarchical business that works very much like a corporation. In Season 1 of *The Wire*, the heroin trade in West Baltimore, controlled by Avon Barksdale, operates very much like a tiered corporate hierarchy, with various levels of workers primarily persisting in a set of high-rise housing projects. With Avon Barksdale as a kind of CEO, his right-hand man, Stringer Bell, is the business and financial intellect of the drug ring. Below him is Avon's nephew D'Angelo Barksdale. D'Angelo is portrayed as a still wet-behind-the-ears up and comer in the business by way of corporate nepotism and familial intimidation. Below the level of these men (indeed, this hierarchy is comprised of virtually all men) are men and boys with set "grunt work" jobs within

the business: shooters and muscle men, money takers, distributors, signalers and runners who deal face-to-face with customers. Each performs a specific duty in the chain of command, and the bureaucracy here is ample.

The manner of exchange is like an assembly line as well—alienated labor perhaps, but also a brilliantly composed strategy for avoiding multiple criminal charges for the workers at the bottom. No worker has money and drugs at the same time, so the worst charge possible for them is possession of small amounts of heroin. The lawyer for Barksdale and his men, Maurice Levy, protects the drug earnings and assets of the group by guiding the money toward properties held under an anonymous corporate name, and by finding infinite subversions of their indictments when their workers are taken into police custody. Like high-powered capitalists in the mainstream free market, the high-level drug dealers and kingpins on *The Wire* can afford legal counsel who are devoted to protecting their clients by educating them on avoiding charges and finding legal loopholes to absolve them.⁵¹

The parallel between drug dealing and legitimate business is dealt with largely through the development of the Stringer Bell character. Stringer Bell first appears early in the series sitting in attendance at D'Angelo Barksdale's murder trial (a murder which he is acquitted of despite his fairly evident guilt). Bell is second to Avon Barksdale for the first season, but afterward is the top man in the ring. From the beginning, Bell is portrayed as a businessman. The show's main police figure, Detective McNulty, follows him into the parking lot of the Baltimore City Community College and peeks into a classroom wherein Bell, sitting in the front row, raises his hand to answer the instructor's inquiry. The presence of Stringer Bell in a business class discussing the capitalist theory of supply and demand shows Bell's awareness of business, and

⁵¹ *Breaking Bad's* Saul Goodman is the same kind of attorney, but portrayed with a comical edge. He wears tacky suits, and has a Donald Trump-like combover hairstyle.

the benefits of knowing how business is run in the legitimate economy.⁵² The principles of supply and demand and of capitalist accumulation apply equally to the illegal trade, though the trauma of physical and psychological addiction contributes an ease to the development of demand.

Stringer Bell's educational endeavors allow him to elaborate on his capitalist vision. After Avon Barksdale is incarcerated, Stringer Bell becomes the head of the operation, and makes decisions for the continued operation of the business after the high-rise towers are destroyed and while the stream of heroin supply is hindered by heightened police activity in the docks in Season 2. He orchestrates a truce with East Baltimore gangs and the leader of their operations, Proposition Joe, to keep drugs flowing in the towers, so customers aren't driven away altogether. During this meeting, Bell tells the group, "Looks like we're gonna make more money. Together. No beefin', no drama, just business." Proposition Joe jokes about their agreement, stating, "For a cold ass crew of gangsters, y'all carried it like Republicans and shit." Later, Stringer leads a coalition of otherwise rival drug dealers to go in together on a large supply of heroin, so that they can all save enormous amounts of money on the venture, creating something like a merger of businesses across Baltimore.

Unlike Barksdale, Bell appears as a businessman, wearing only professional attire and operating largely from behind a desk in an office tucked away in a funeral home owned by Barksdale. Prior to Barksdale's incarceration, the organization communicates through word of mouth, brief telephone calls, and the occasional, disorganized face-to-face meeting. Once Bell takes over, the whole crew convenes regularly in the funeral home for group meetings, in which all the street level dealers and muscle men sit in chairs while Bell works from a notes sheet to

⁵² Similarly, "Crazy 8" Tampico tells Walt about his degree in business and other scholarly interests while he is locked up to the drainpipe in Jesse's basement in Season 1 of *Breaking Bad*.

keep the meeting flowing in an organized manner. Bell is clearly working to operate the drug ring like any manner of business, with concern only for the maximization of earnings, and he tries to be faithful to the protocol of business practices he's learned in his classes.

Stringer's intentions are to move out of the drug business into legitimate capitalist ventures, in particular, real estate. During the third season of *The Wire*, Bell meets with Senator Clay Davis and his associates with regard to the funding of real estate development. McNulty and his colleague Kima continue to investigate Bell even after their boss, Lt. Daniels, orders them to give it up. Upon paying a visit to Stringer Bell's copy store, McNulty learns that Bell is investing in "legitimate" business, by way of real estate ventures. Bell lets McNulty know he will be selling condos soon, and to let him know if he's interested. Later, McNulty tells his colleagues that "He tried to sell me a condo...[M]ight as well join the Rotary and take up golf or some shit...Mr. Bell has become 'The Bank.'" Freamon elaborates,

"'The Bank' plays it legit. He generates a good bit of honest income, but at the same time his money finances packages [of drugs] that he himself will never touch. He won't go near the street. He's insulated from the everyday operations of the corner. The money that comes back is then laundered through enough straight business investments that there's no way to trace it."

Bell's entrance into legitimate business is funded by crime. When Avon Barksdale is released from prison, Bell and Barksdale have to figure out their relationship and business arrangements again. Stringer explains the merger with the other drug leaders of Baltimore, and his plan to distance their money from the corners. He explains,

We take our shit downtown, we get in the money game that niggas ain't going to jail. I mean, we past that run and gun shit, man. We find us a package and we ain't

gotta see nothin but bank. Nothin but cash. No corners, no territory, nothin. We make so much god damn straight money, man, government come after us, man, ain't shit they could say...let the young ones worry about how to retail...[W]ho gives a fuck about who's standin on what corner we taking that shit off the top, and putting it to good use. Makin' that shit work for us. We can run more than corners, B. Period.

Bell continues his pitch to Barksdale about his plans to build a new enterprise through real estate, so that the two of them can rule the city like Little Willy, a Baltimore street legend, "and run this god damn city." Ultimately, Barksdale decides to keep himself out of Bell's plans to go legit, stating that he "Ain't no suit man business man like you. Just a gangster, I suppose." This is not to suggest that Barksdale is not a businessman and a capitalist like Bell, but that he prefers to maintain a street-driven sense of his power and masculinity through the hands-on violence of the street. He likes the notoriety and territorialism of his current position.

Stringer Bell is a capitalist entrepreneur as much as any other businessman characterized on television. Like Walter White, he is intelligent, industrious, and duplicitous. However, Bell's endeavors are doomed, because, though he is smart, determined, and experienced in the economy of the street, he is nevertheless not primed for the racketeering of the real estate market. Senator Davis continuously gives him the runaround on time frames and details for their building project, telling him, "it ain't like a drug deal," that the turnaround on money is slow. Bell is too eager. The man at the bank doesn't want to include him as a developer, even though he has contributed so much money, because he doesn't have a name in legitimate business.

Walter White's crossover into illegal drugs is much more successful than Stringer Bell's crossover into real estate. The indication is that the drug economy and culture is easier to

navigate and enter into than the legitimate, or at least "respectable" economy. What comes to the fore in the two stories is a continuum of theft and acquisition across the line of legal and illegal business. In both, it seems, there is a certain kind of person who is capable of traversing the landscape of investment and risk on both ends, and Walter White is more representative of this type than is Stringer Bell. Bell's impoverished, black, urban upbringing makes him a long shot for success, as does his lack of education. Though he attends community college and understands the importance of school, investing time in knowledge acquisition and practical application, his educational background is nowhere near as elevated as is Walter's PhD in chemistry. Likewise, though Walt had been essentially robbed of his chemistry work for Gray Matters, his cultural capital as a highly educated man allows him entry into the drug market, which Bell's extensive street experience cannot provide him in the legal enterprises he strives to build. After Bell is killed, McNulty visits his apartment and finds a shelf of books, including *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith's tome upon which American capitalism is based. This iconic work solidifies Bell's symbolic representation of one for whom the American Dream is inaccessible. He espouses the spirit and drive of capital, and rises to a high position within an illicit capitalist economy, tied to the legitimate economy, but in his effort to cross over, he is killed.

The various large economic enterprises portrayed on *Breaking Bad*—the chemical company, Fring's restaurants and laundry operations, and the Whites' car wash—portray dependence on under-the-table, criminal engagement as an essential part of fiscal dominance. It's also clear in the show that the converse is also true. It is not only that legitimate commerce depends on the illegitimate, but also that the apparent barriers between honest capitalism and crime assist in the successes of capitalist endeavors on the "wrong" side of the law.

One of Woodiwiss's main theses in *Gangster Capitalism* is that the formation of the category of "organized crime" obscures the gangster-like cronyism and pure thievery of all commerce. The reason for the development of the perceptual divide, he argues, is the effect of moral programs on the law. Evangelical Christianity and ideas of sin and vice influenced the outlawing of various substances and practices (homo sex for example), and were the driving force behind prohibition. Woodiwiss explains,

By the beginning of the twentieth century many had supported the tide of moral reform that effectively shifted attention away from the power and behavior of corporations towards aspects of the personal behavior of the masses considered to be unhealthy and undesirable in this still very puritan nation. (5)

As the moralism around sexual and gender difference pushed the kinds of people portrayed in *Paris is Burning* away from consideration as part of the working class, so the sectors of the working class whose tastes or interests fall into the realm of the undesirable or destructive fall out of the dominant representation of the working class. Futzing over moral and behavioral distinctions between groups of the exploited takes attention away from the similarities between figures like Walter White or Gustavo Fring and Donald Trump or the president of British Petroleum.⁵³

The divide created by moralism serves the capitalist class tremendously. While evangelicals and others campaigned for outlawing vice, a great deal of the country's businesses supported the move, and not necessarily for the purpose of saving the population from harm or wrongdoing. Woodiwiss notes, "Thanks to the support of business as well as the ceaseless

⁵³ Tony Hayward, the president of British Petroleum at the time of the gulf oil spill responded to the effects on the environment and on the livelihood of the fishing and shrimping workers as part of the normal risk of capitalism. Similarly, Walt refers to the worker immigrants who work for Fring, and the street-level drug dealers who lose their lives as collateral damage.

campaigning of moral reformers, America became a land where goods and services considered undesirable by some were prohibited to all by law. They were still available, however, but at a higher price because of their outlaw status. The entrepreneurial possibilities for even those at the lower levels of society were obvious" (5).

For Woodiwiss, moralism in law creates an imagined Other—such as The Mafia, inner-city gangs, Mexican and South American drug cartels, poachers and black marketeers in Asia and Africa—which we imagine as simultaneously alien enough to be easily distinguishable from *us* (the criminal element is freaky) and rare or separate enough to remain out of our sight. Visibility and invisibility is based on class distinction, too—the top one percent in both economies are invisible, while the masses are visible and often blamed for the crimes of the capitalist classes. Woodiwiss's work indicates that the creation of moral others makes scapegoats of the working class, while allowing total freedom to thieves and exploiters at the top. This moral Othering has the effect of moving already marginalized people further to the fringes to be exploited by capitalists operating semi-invisibly in illegal trades. When the whole of an industry such as the illegal drug trade operates at the fringes, the capacity for capitalist exploitation is exacerbated. This capital accumulation happens clandestinely, and the abuse of underclass people within it occurs in the dark as well.

Because the drug trade is part of the capitalist system and is connected to the free market, it exploits the working class and lumpen people, whose failures amount to queerness in the anti-normative sense I have described. Any character on *Breaking Bad* who is subject to Walt fails, to varying degrees. While there is not the usual post-"Gay 90s" obligatory gay character on *Breaking Bad*, the show features a couple of covertly queer characters, who are contrasted with Walter's white heterosexual masculinity. One who stands out significantly as a queer failure in

the series is Gale Boetticher, who is Walt's understudy and assistant in Gus Fring's spectacular meth superlab during a period when Jesse Pinkman and Walt are estranged.

When Fring presents the lab to Walt, he also presents Gale as a part of the agreement. Gale introduces himself to Walt in the spirit of a fanboy, deeply nervous as he sycophantically presents Walter with his academic CV. Walt reads the CV and exclaims, "X-Ray crystallography! We could talk about that for hours." Excitedly, Gale responds, "I would love to," all the while gazing longingly at Walt, the lighting providing a romantic twinkle in his eye. Here, Walt is a sort of chemistry heartthrob for Gale. And in fact, the two wind up talking at length after that day's "cook." After the day is over, Gale and Walt relax together at a table placed in front of a vent, with light coming through creating a silhouette of the two of them. They are drinking wine and talking about their mutual love of chemistry.

The background is also romantic as the two drink wine in the light of the underground lab's air vent. When Walt asks why Gale is doing what he's doing, despite his vast experience in the field of chemistry, he explains that it's really the hands-on nature of the lab, rather than meetings and conferences pertaining to chemistry and scientific theory, that drive him. To elucidate his point, he recites a poem by Walt Whitman, "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer:"

When I heard the learn'd astronomer;
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;
When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them;
When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in
the lecture-room,
How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;

Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,

In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,

Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

A brief, electric silence follows, after which Gale says, "Yes. I am a nerd." And of course within the context of methamphetamine production and those associated with it, Gale is certainly a nerd, as someone whose interests are artistic and academic. However, what this statement also stands in for, especially in the way that Gale says it, is his own probable gayness. He's gay for chemistry, and gay for Walt. The two conclude their conversation with the agreement that the lab, where the chemical mixing takes place, is still "magic" to them. There is a romance between them in this moment as they share a secret world of chemistry (I mean, CHEMISTRY, come on!) and Walt Whitman's poetry. Here, the two men reveal their passion for the same, somewhat niche, and rare art, that is, ironically, the science of cooking meth. Likewise, the name likeness of Walter White to Walt Whitman indicates Walt's queer potential for Gale and in general. The next day, Gale arrives to the lab in dress clothes, evidently trying very hard to impress Walt--professionally, of course, but also personally.

Gale's gayness is further indicated in scenes of him alone in his apartment. Queer spaces are sacred "safe" spaces and endangered by the "invasion" of straight voyeurs interested in the spectacle of gay life and difference. Representations of queer life often include a "private realm" which provides seclusion from hetero-policing as well as a space of individual queer taste and enjoyment (Corteen et al, 176). Two scenes show Gale in this private space, and indicate his character. In the first, Gale is about to receive a visit from Gus Fring. He is listening to campy Italian vocal music, and singing along to the higher pitched lyrics, while swaying his hips

effeminately and tossing his limp wrists into the air in rhythm. He then walks around the house watering a number of very beautifully well-kept house plants, succulents and ferns. This allows the camera to sweep through his apartment and hover over the numerous tchotchkes and kitschy items that decorate his apartment.⁵⁴ A queer, campy aesthetic is built into the character of Gale. Gale's tastes might appear to a heterosexual viewer who is not somehow "in the know" about queer aesthetics as simply effete and nerdy. However, camp intuition and queer aesthetic knowledge are likely to pinpoint Gale's queer nature from seeing him in his private space.

Gale is easily queered but difficult to place along a class spectrum. His lifestyle, as shown in scenes of him at home, indicates the bohemianism frequently investigated by queer theorists working on failure. He may come from an affluent background, since he has an extensive and quality education. He has what seems to be elevated taste for wine and coffee, but also is shown to have base, uncool tastes (not specifically working-class or lumpen) for wearing socks with sandals, riding a recumbent bicycle, and singing karaoke.⁵⁵ He likely makes a good deal of money cooking for Fring, but he lives in a small, somewhat run-down apartment that has a visual rhyme with other media representations of gay men's apartments. He is also very evidently going to be overtaken by the force of Walter White's social power.

The second scene of Gale in his apartment begins just before Jesse knocks at the door and fatally shoots Gale to save himself and Walt. Gale is again ensconced in items and activities of

⁵⁴ Numerous scholars have worked on the specifically queer nature of camp, as opposed to Susan Sontag's famous claims about camp sensibility as apolitical and outside identity in the 1960s. Moe Meyer argues emphatically that "Camp embodies a specifically queer cultural critique" (1). He uses the concept of parody posed by Linda Hutcheon, as "'an extended repetition with critical difference'" (8), and argues that, "Without the process of parody the marginalized agent has no access to representation, the apparatus of which is controlled by the dominant order. Camp, as specifically queer parody, becomes, then, the only process by which the queer is able to enter representation and to produce social visibility" (9). Gale's cavorting around his space singing along to music out of temporal and spatial relation to himself represents parody in these terms. That it is also queer camp is attached to his other queer interests, his general performative effeminacy, and his subtle but evident intellectual and romantic affection for Walt.

⁵⁵ Though I read Gale's statement about being a nerd as a queer confession, he is also a nerd in traditional terms. After he has died, Hank and the other DEA agents watch a YouTube video of Gale singing karaoke and laugh.

queer camp taste. He is shown over his stove, boiling water for tea, the temperature of which he measures with a temperature radar gun. Again, he's listening to odd, high-pitched vaudevillian singing. The way in which Gale is portrayed only within the confines of specific enclosed spaces throughout his character's run on the series emphasizes his queerness and the limits of his potential and opportunities as a queer person. Because he's virtually never pictured outside of his home or the meth lab, he is portrayed as especially socially confined, and juxtaposed with Walt's reproductive heterosexuality and capitalist dominance, his queerness takes on an economically contingent character as well. When Jesse arrives at his front door to kill him, Gale, thinking that Jesse is a robber, tells him that he can have whatever he wants, and that he has a lot of money. However, Jesse has had to stalk Gale to find where he lives. His address is kept secret and he is not in the phonebook or searchable online. Though he has a great deal of money, he's under sequester by Fring and his men. His movement is limited by his servitude to the Fring operation.

Gustavo Fring himself is also a complicated queer character. The queerness of Gale Boetticher strengthens other elements of understanding Gustavo Fring's character as potentially homosexual. His presence in Fring's circle makes very little sense, save for the fact that he was the recipient of a scholarship awarded by Fring in the name of his dead partner/brother. Fring is a Chilean immigrant who operates as a high-level drug dealer in relative secrecy, able to mask his doings by couching them inside his ownership of the fast food chain, Los Pollos Hermanos. He is extremely powerful as well as wise to the workings of business and the workers he has in his charge. As a man of significant wealth and a capitalist, his presence appears to undo my suggestions about Walter's white male heterosexual privilege and ability to rapidly ascend in the drug economy. His particularly explosive demise and his unusual characterization as a person of

color and a potentially queer figure, however, are emblematic of his difference from Walt, a symbol of capitalist masculinity and imperialism.⁵⁶

Fring's queerness is similar to that which Lee Edelman discusses in *No Future*. Fring is absolutely a high capitalist on both sides of the law. But he's still in a peculiar and precarious queer and classed position to Walt, racially, nationally, and in terms of his relationship to reproductive norms. In *No Future*, Edelman is troublingly unconcerned with class, leading him to a very curious and provocative reading of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. He argues that Ebenezer Scrooge is a queer figure who initially occupies an important position of pressure against reproductive heteronormativity represented in the family of Scrooge's overworked and underpaid employee, Bob Cratchit. Edelman reads the crippled and vulnerable Tiny Tim Cratchit as a symbol of the Cult of the Child: an image of a perpetually deferred future that is being destroyed by the imposition of the non-reproductive queer with no future represented by Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge, by way of his attachment to the memory of another man, his former partner Jacob Marley, who haunts his thoughts and dreams; his non-reproductive status (one of the traits of misers is that they have no family); and his initial disdain for the family, children, and the things that bring joy to the lives of others, becomes in Edelman's reading an older gay man, an effete and anti-social loner.

Fring is similar to Scrooge in that he appears to live an exceptionally solitary life. He has lost a partner whom he loved, and, though he talks of a family, family members are never shown. In the course of the series, Fring's discussion of family is always embedded in his discussions with Walt, which are intended to appeal to Walt's masculine ego. When Walter refuses to return to cooking (in one of his many threats to leave the business, all of which are arguably false),

⁵⁶ Walt kills Fring by planting a bomb on the elderly and invalid Hector Salamanca, Fring's long-time nemesis, who killed the man Fring called his brother.

Fring shows him the new, state-of-the-art laboratory he has built in a hidden part of a giant industrial laundry facility he owns. This is just after Skyler has served Walter with divorce papers, and Walter performs guilt about his broken marriage as reasoning to reject Fring's offer, which works as leverage for him to negotiate more money and privilege in Fring's operation. Walt explains that he is not actually the criminal sort, and that he has made a string of "bad decisions" that have brought him here. Fring asks Walt why he's made these decisions:

Walt: "For the good of my family."

Fring: "Then they weren't bad decisions."

Fring then appeals very strongly to Walt's manhood. This negotiation on Fring's part can be read as an experience-based tactic for persuading men like Walter to do what he wants. It is also a lot like the persuasion strategies Walt uses on Jesse.

Fring: "What does a man do, Walt? A man *provides* for his family...When you have children you will always have family. They will always be your responsibility...and a *man*, a man provides." Here, Fring turns very stern in demeanor, scowling at Walt, implying that he doubts Walt's manhood, because Walt refuses to work for him. Fring's appeals to Walter mirror what Messerschmidt explains is the key factor in blue and white collar crime, which is the preservation of masculine status by way of providing for family. Messerschmidt explains that white-collar men "use the male breadwinner discourse (he is the economic provider for the family) but extend this notion to include employees and their families" (6). The inclusion of dependents beyond the family clarifies the role Jesse plays in Walt's self-creation. Here, Gustavo knows how Walt thinks, but there is no material evidence over the course of the show that he himself is a family man.

Edelman suggests that Tiny Tim and the Cratchit family destroy Scrooge by pulling him into the normative fold of reproductive futurity. In his reading, Scrooge loses his queer disruptive/ destructive power by being drawn into the Cult of the Child. In a sense, Edelman rereads *A Christmas Carol* as a tragedy in which Tiny Tim and the Cratchits represent an antagonistic force against Scrooge. Indeed, since Edelman is pointedly pro-antagonism (his best trait as a critic), he antagonizes by rooting for the "bad guy," and mourning his downfall:

Scrooge may owe his representation to the traditional iconography of the miser as filtered through the lens of a liberal critique of emergent industrial capitalism, but the sins of the counting house count for little in the course of Dickens' text until they are made to account metonymically for the death of that little, little child... (42)

Edelman is right that too often anti-capitalist readings hinge on greed's effect on children and babies, overshadowing the danger to adult people or groups at large. However, he's incorrect (or just uninterested) that Scrooge's variety of economic power and greed is not influential beyond the child or reproductive futurity. Edelman is actually pinpointing the precise dichotomous thinking that drives so much normativity in class critique: it's either the future by way of the well-behaved family or it's death, the void, the vacuum. In the case of *Breaking Bad*, there are at least two Scrooges: Gustavo Fring and Walter White. However, Walter White is not Bob Cratchit, though Walter Junior's likeness to Tiny Tim is worth noticing. Walt is an even bigger Scrooge than Fring, but one that is building futurity by way of exploiting and even killing queer people and people of color.

Like many other shows revolving around masculinity in crisis, *Breaking Bad* "address[es] the big issues of a decadent empire: violence, sexuality, addiction, family, class" (Martin 7). It is

not possible to talk about the drug industry as part of a capitalist economy without talking about globalization and neo-colonialism. Importantly, the proletarian class in the drug economy of *Breaking Bad* consists primarily of people of color, and the large majority of those are nationals of other countries in a relationship of economic subordination to the United States. Many people who pay the price (often by way of spectacular death) for Walter's crimes are people of color—a number of small-time drug dealers, Mexican and South American illegal and legal immigrants (some of whom are represented as extremely violent and dangerous), two young boys, and many more by the end of the series.

Again, Walter's normative whiteness stands out against people of color, particularly immigrants who are re-colonized by his intentional and inadvertent actions. The reclamation of the power of the white male represented in Walter White, by way of a sudden increase in economic production, sexual power, and physical capacities, is necessarily accompanied by a return to the top of the racial hierarchy of power. Walt's change is imperialist in nature, insofar as his rise coincides with the death and disempowerment of scores of people of color, beginning with Emilio and Domingo "Crazy 8" Tampico and leading through to kingpin Gustavo Fring and others. The death of "Crazy 8" early in the series is portrayed as necessary to save the White family from harm, as Walter's list of pros and cons to killing Crazy 8 shows: "He will kill your entire family" is at the top of the list of pros. However, the death is also very much about race, as we learn through conversation between Walt and his victim that the Tampico furniture store, owned by Crazy 8's father, made the baby crib of Walter, Junior. After Walt has strangled Crazy 8 to death with the horseshoe bicycle lock that restrains him (by the neck, to a large pipe in the basement), the camera shows a close-up of the Tampico logo on the crib in the yet-to-be-born baby's room. The juxtaposition implies that "Crazy 8" Tampico must die so that the White baby

can live; it is a racially constructed hierarchy of whose lives matter and whose do not, whose children must die for Walter to rise and his children to thrive. The criminal nature of Crazy 8 is irrelevant to this structure of power, especially since Walter's crime against the Tampicos is "real" while Crazy 8's crime is merely a speculation (not even a probability, since any audience member can guess what must happen).

Just as a cultural race war emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century (continuing centuries of racism of myriad forms in America), Walt as representative of white racial identity reflects the current paranoia in particularly racist circles about the amelioration of the white racial legacy in the United States through ethnic diversity run amok and weak borders, especially since the election of Barack Obama (Hua 1). Walter's masculine transformation is attached to reclaiming white supremacy through his physical and economic destruction of non-white people, the first of whom is Emilio, followed by "Crazy 8." As the son of a Mexican-American business owner, "Crazy 8"'s death is one of the first indications that Walter's transformation will involve a kind of racial cleansing.

Whiteness is clearly emphasized in Walt's character, by way of his very name. Walter White, in addition to the name play linking him to Walt Whitman, is the emblem of whiteness, and this whiteness is empowered by his wresting wealth and industry from racial Others. The racialized nature of Walter White's ascent to power becomes even more pronounced (and complicated) later in the series when he goes into business with a group of white supremacists, by way of a character named Todd. Todd, who works for the fumigation company that Walt and Saul Goodman use as a front for the business after Gustavo Fring dies, is an eager, if subpar, substitute for Jesse, as an apprentice meth cook. At first, it isn't explicitly stated that Todd is a neo-Nazi. He is quiet and polite, with red hair and freckles, reminiscent of Opie from *The Andy*

Griffith Show. In fact, Jesse refers to him as "Opie Hitler" at one point. His seeming All-American characterization morphs quickly into his being revealed as scarily devoid of ethics or scruples. Todd's characterization complements a reading of Walt as an American Dream achiever: Todd is a Walter White-like character, a hopeful whose merit isn't quite adequate to bring him out of his circumstance as merely a worker. He's not exactly a sympathetic character, but he, unlike Walt or Jesse, exemplifies a proletarian reaching inappropriately above his station.

The fact that Walt, who does not outwardly appear to hold or express racist attitudes, gets into bed, so to speak, with the neo-Nazis, elucidates some important consequences of a kind of libertarian devotion to self-interest and unscrupulous self-interest of the capitalist class.⁵⁷ Walt's lack of attachment to the racialized economic interests of his new partners doesn't absolve him from their racism or its effects. The drug trade is racialized, and the effect of methamphetamines on communities of color is indicated elsewhere on television.⁵⁸ Likewise, punishments for drug crimes are disproportionately harsher for people of color. Walt's business partnership with the white supremacists bolsters their social power by giving them the reins in an enterprise that has become global (he inherits a connection to European drug markets from his overtake of the Fring operation once Gus Fring is dead). Despite the fact that he kills Todd and his uncle and cousin in the final episode, Walt is not making an anti-racist statement in doing so. He does not kill them because they are ethically repugnant, but because they endanger him and his family, which is superior in class and education and appears to constitute a larger, more enduring, "white" legacy.

⁵⁷ Walt's relationship with the white supremacists suggests a critique of libertarianism, in a cultural moment in which mainstream political figures are exposed as bigoted, or apologists for bigotry. Ron Paul specifically has been criticized for racist and homophobic statements published in his political newsletters, and for his acceptance of campaign donations from white supremacist leaders and organizations. Likewise, republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has been permissive of outspoken racist groups in support of his campaign, and has likewise been criticized for a continuing pattern of racist insinuation and blatant racial and religious bigotry.

⁵⁸ For instance, in the HBO series *Big Love*, the main character, polygamist Bill Henrickson, buys into a casino on an American Indian reservation, and he learns about the scourge of methamphetamine on reservations across the US.

Like queers, people of color, and foreign nationals, women die or are disenfranchised through Walt's actions. These women include his partner Jesse's two girlfriends, one of whom Walter watches die choking on her own vomit during a heroin binge, and the other of whom is assassinated by the white supremacists (to whom Walter bequeaths his meth business when he "retires") who capture and enslave Jesse in the final season.⁵⁹ His wife, Skyler, too, is in a position of submission to Walter, first because he lies to her about his circumstances, forcing her into an understandable panic; later, because she fears that she is in too deep in Walt's criminal activity to be able to avoid criminal charges herself; finally, because, as a parent of two in economic precarity, whose boss in the legitimate economy has endangered her job by committing tax fraud, she depends on money the family acquires for her income. She is dependent upon this money to sustain the lives of herself and her children.

The character of Skyler is complexly positioned in relation to Walt's capitalist, masculinist rise. On the one hand, she's trapped by Walt's criminal life, and a victim of Walt's violence and chauvinist aggression. On the other hand, she arguably becomes an opportunist who, as far as we know, inherits along with her children the enormous fortune Walt leaves behind when he dies. She's also in a precarious position as a working person: she is a struggling writer who occasionally makes money selling items on eBay. When she does go back to work as an accountant at the Beneke company, her income is again contingent upon her complicity with white male capitalist crime-tax fraud-and her availability as a sexual object to Ted Beneke. Viewer response to her character is so negative and vitriolic (resulting in death threats to Anna

⁵⁹ Walt chooses not to save Jane as she chokes in order to regain control over Jesse's life, which causes a chain reaction in which Jane's father, an air-traffic controller, makes a serious error that causes an in-air collision between two aircraft. The debris falls all over the neighborhood Walt lives in, and, significantly, bits of aircraft fall into the White family's swimming pool, along with a charred pink teddy bear. This plot device requires quite a bit of suspended disbelief, but is indicative of the spiraling destructive power Walt possesses, and that results from his exploitative nature.

Gunn, the actress who plays the character), that it has come to be known as "The Skyler White Effect." This is the phenomenon of viewer disdain for television wives who thwart their husbands' drives toward masculinist libertarian sexual or economic unscrupulousness. Online, "The Skyler White Effect" is defined as the "cognitive dissonance that happens when a female character is presented by the narrative as absolutely correct in their judgment of a male character, and yet the viewers assume that she's the bitch" (<http://destronomics.tumblr.com>). Critics have noted this effect in relation to other women characters, including *Mad Men*'s Betty Draper and Carmela Soprano. Brett Martin points to a connective thread of emasculation linking a number of contemporary dramas, enhanced by a viewership of men who believe they've been emasculated by women as well (85).

Skyler is hated in particular for her efforts to exert some control over her life. She has an affair with her employer, Ted Beneke, as a way to exert agency over her life and body after she discovers Walt's secret. When she finds out he is a meth cook, she kicks him out of the house. He refuses to leave, so she fucks Ted as a symbol of their permanent estrangement. This tactic ultimately does not work, and Ted is eventually another of Walt's victims, and a very important one, since Ted is also representative of white, male, heterosexual class privilege. That Walt eventually dominates Ted indicates his full rise to masculine power. Walt, though he never unambiguously rapes Skyler, on more than one occasion exhibits sexual aggression toward her, and dominance over her as his wife, even after she expresses her unwillingness to live as his wife in that way.

The increasing masculine dominance Walt wields over Skyler culminates in his telephone call with her when he is being hunted by the FBI and the police. What is shortly thereafter revealed to be a strategic move on Walter's part to absolve Skyler from responsibility for his

crimes in the eyes of law enforcement is in keeping with Walt's prior behavior toward Skyler. As the police begin to bear down on him, he calls Skyler:

Walt: Why can't you do one thing I say? This is your fault. This is what comes of your disrespect. I told you, Skyler. I warned you for a solid year...you cross me, there will be consequences. What part of that didn't you understand?

Skyler: You took my child.

Walt: Because you need to learn.

Skyler: Bring her back.

Walt: Maybe now you'll listen. Maybe now you'll use your damn head. You know, you never believed in me. You were never grateful for anything I did for this family.

[mimicking Skyler] *Walt, Walt, you have to stop...it's immoral, it's illegal...*always whining and complaining about how I make my money, just dragging me down while I do everything. And now you tell my son what I do, after I told you and told you to keep your damn mouth shut. You stupid bitch. How dare you?

Skyler: I'm sorry.

Walt: You have no right to discuss anything about what I do...I built this.

Me alone. Nobody else! You mark my words, Skyler. Toe the line, or you will wind up just like Hank [who has been killed at this point].

Although it is revealed through a later conversation with Saul Goodman that Walt planned the phone abuse as a way to protect Skyler, the words he says, because of "The Skyler White Effect," are not unexpected. They are words Walt seems to have wanted to say all along. Though he may be performing for the police, he also seems to enjoy speaking the words. He performs them with absolute conviction. There are reasons, too, to believe that although he might

have supposedly altruistic reasons for saying the words, he actually means them. His rhetoric about personal capitalist ascension and individual empire-building begins, as I've discussed, well before he needs to "protect" anyone with these words. Likewise, she receives them as though they have been expected. It is never indicated that Skyler had any idea of Walt's plan, and she nonetheless is unfazed by his verbal cruelty. Their dynamic makes clear how much he's taken on the role of aggressive, chauvinist patriarch relative to his financial success in the economy of drug dealing.

From the start of Walt's foray into meth, he is forced to be secretive—his cancer diagnosis serves him for only so long as an excuse—and his silence and frequent absence hurt and disturb his wife and son. After Skyler finds out about Walt's meth-making, she files for divorce, and they separate. Walt moves out, into an apartment, and they live separately. When she wants to run the carwash, Walt knows it's a great idea but refuses her until he can finagle an arrangement with her wherein he is allowed to return home to "sleep in my own bed." The return to the marriage bed hints at his regaining of sexual control. He is persistently insistent about his own sexual dominance over Skyler, even when she is clearly repulsed by him. She's very stuck, and she does what she can with her circumstances.

Breaking Bad's presentations of working-class abuse and gendered power relations converge in the character of Wendy, a methamphetamine-addicted prostitute who operates and apparently lives in The Crossroads Motel, which Hank refers to as "The Crystal Palace" because of its inhabitation by contingent addicts and dealers. Wendy is a recurring character in the second and third seasons, and is a "friend" and customer of Jesse's, and vice-versa. She's played with remarkable verisimilitude by the actress Julia Minesci, who is made up to show the extreme long-term physical effects of methamphetamine. Her hair is thin, greasy, and stringy, and her

face is mottled with scars and sores. Her teeth are rotten and brown, and her face and body are emaciated to the point that she looks like her skin is hanging over her skeleton with no tissue between. Her addiction is visibly unmistakable.

Wendy's characterization fits in with the descriptions of female drug addicts and sex workers in Bourgois and Schonberg's socio-ethnography *Righteous Dopefiend*, which details daily life and strife for drug addicts living in the urban setting of San Francisco in the late 1990s. In particular, one female addict they describe displayed a "defiant lumpen femininity" in her day-to-day life, even when she was not "turning tricks." This woman "dressed to the hilt," in the sense that she attired herself in hyperfeminine attire, fancy skirts, silk and satin blouses, and always wore makeup, to the point of reapplying lipstick after smoking crack cocaine (48). Bourgois and Schonberg describe the attachment to femininity as a method of retaining a sense of womanhood in the harsh context of the street and its violence, as well as maintaining a connection to sexuality and "the practical value of sex," meaning that the practice of femininity contributed to female addicts' capacity to earn money through sex. Wendy, though her urban context is Albuquerque rather than San Francisco, and though methamphetamine addiction is surely different from addiction to crack cocaine, also exhibits an attachment to markers of hyperfemininity, and is always shown wearing eye make-up and lipstick, and wearing tight, revealing, feminine attire, even in the privacy of her motel room. Her presentation indicates a similar dually-valenced attachment to femininity, which expresses her sense of self as still a human being and part of a society as well as a sex-worker attempting to maintain the appeal of the product she is selling.

The characterization of Wendy is unique because it doesn't fit neatly into categories of representation of prostitutes and addicts that persist in the media. She is neither pathologically

wicked and selfish, nor a dignified worker despite circumstances. She's not represented as either a good or a bad person, and her character is not moralized about, but she invites empathy because of her treatment by others. She is both off-putting in her unrefined behavior (spitting, cursing, urinating outside), which Bourgois and Schonberg describe as partly a defense mechanism on the part of female sex workers ("in gray zones, aggression is the most effective means of asserting rights" for women on the street), and curiously charming in her seeming obliviousness to how she is perceived ("society's opprobrium and personal public failure are the least of her worries" [81]). Because of her multifaceted characterization, she is a surprisingly visible and likeable lumpen figure for mainstream television.⁶⁰

Early on, Skyler White asks her sister Maria about the effects of marijuana (thinking that Walt is smoking pot). Assuming Schuyler is referring to Walt, Jr, Maria has Hank try to guide the boy away from drugs. Hank takes Walt, Jr., to the parking lot of the motel, and he calls Wendy over from a vending machine in front of the building. He both harasses and propositions Wendy in order to prove a point to Walt Jr. He asks her:

"Hey you, yeah you! Princess! Get over here."

"I ain't holdin', okay?"

"Did I say you could open your mouth? Hands off the car!...What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Wendy."

"How much you charge for a windy, Wendy?"

"I ain't doin' him, he's a kid!"

⁶⁰ Bubbles and Johnny on *The Wire* are also nuanced lumpen characters, who are not portrayed as either moral or immoral, and elicit sympathy despite their criminal and addict behaviors. However, *The Wire* is woefully bereft of any complex representation of female lumpen people.

"Jesus, was that my question? Don't think so hard, you're gonna hurt your brain. Now, are you on the pipe or you on the needle?"

"Nothing. Neither."

"Yeah, yeah. Just show us your teeth. Come on, Wendy, let's see those pearly whites."

Here, Wendy scowls, but shows her teeth, which are rotted and brown.

"Oh, god. See that? Pipe, definitely Big time, big time on the pipe...you ever smoke anything else, Wendy? Sausages don't count... [he laughs at his own joke] Seriously. Tell my friend here how you got started. Probably used to be what...a girl scout? Probably sang in the church choir."

Wendy looks at Walter, Jr. She asks:

"What are you, like, handicapped?"

"He broke his leg playing football...So tell me, Wendy, you smoke pot?"

"Why, you got some?"

"Alright, hoof it, get lost. Get out of here! Fair warning: next time I'm gonna bust ya!"

After this, Wendy returns to her motel room to meet a paranoid, high Jesse, asking if Hank and Walter, Jr., were asking about him. She tells him she thinks they just wanted pot, and they begin to have sex dispassionately. Wendy laments that she forgot to grab her root beer.

In another, later scene, Wendy is interrogated by the police about Jesse's involvement with drug dealer Tuco Salamanca, an enormous, meth-fueled psychopath who kidnaps Walt and Jesse and takes them to his uncle Hector's isolated desert home. Hector is a lifelong drug kingpin and violent criminal, who in his old age is bound to a wheelchair and is unable to speak. After various attempts at escape, Walt and Jesse eventually get out of the house and away from Tuco, and Walt shoots Tuco. Tuco is able to sustain the trauma of Walt's shots, and stands teetering on

the front lawn of the home, when Hank shows up. He arrives at the scene looking for Walt, and ends up finding Tuco. Walt and Jesse are able to run free from the scene while Hank engages the injured Tuco. Tuco is killed by Hank, who later receives accolades for taking down the known criminal.

Of course, Jesse's car is found at the scene of the shootout. The DEA breaks down Wendy's door to find Jesse and Wendy high together. They are taken in to the station and each interrogated. Wendy is Jesse's alibi; he has actually just returned to town, but his story is that he and Wendy have been "partying for three days straight," and that he had no idea his car was missing. In response, Hank threatens, "We're gonna go talk to that skinny, yeastbag of a girlfriend you got. I got a feeling she's gonna roll on ya." His language in referencing Wendy is abusive, shaming, and moralistic, in addition to being chauvinistic. He tries to use Wendy as leverage against Jesse, assuming that she is weak-minded and manipulable. However, he doesn't offer anything of value to her in exchange for what he expects her to do, and so he fails to convince her to "roll."

In the interrogation room, Hank continues his patent denial of Wendy's humanity, and destroys his opportunity to solve what is to him (but not the audience) a mystery: "Where's my rootbeer? Come on! I gotta pee and I got low blood-sugar. I got medical issues." The camera lingers above her face, giving emphasis to her withered cheeks and thin, bleached-out hair. She is wearing a tube top and heavy jewelry, and her red lipstick makes the rot of her gums and teeth look especially dark. The shot then moves out to an aerial view of Wendy and Hank in the interrogation room, and the reflection of the two of them in the two-way mirror, then into a shot-reverse shot sequence.

"What kind of medical issues? Like penis withdrawal? You got schlongus interruptus?" [Hank again laughs at his own joke] Listen, Wendy, talk to me and you get a root beer or a tinkle."

"I told you. We were shacked up since Saturday."

"Neither of you left the room, not even for a little, little minute? Not even for a second?"

"For a second? I don't know. Maybe." She scratches at her hairline and face, and her eyes dart around. She is clearly anxious.

"Maybe? Hmmm. Did Jesse leave the room? He did, didn't he?...Wendy, you can do it...Wendy, Wendy, Wendy...You know you want to go back to giving windies, Wendy" His voice becomes infantilizing and teasing in the same way it did in their first encounter in the motel parking lot. He can't resist his desire to abuse and shame her for her occupation and lifestyle, and it ruins his chances to get information from her.

She recognizes him in this moment, and furrows her brow, exclaiming, "It's you. I know you! You're the one in the black truck. You wanted me to do that kid!" At this point, Hank's partner interjects with a "What?" to which Hank goes stiff with the realization that he could look pretty bad if he was suspected of hiring prostitutes, especially for his nephew.

He answers, "How about we stay on topic?" At this point, Wendy has firmed up her resolve and returns to her original story:

"Look Jesse came over to the palace at nine Saturday night. We were together the whole time and he never left the room. And that's all I'm sayin' about that. Now come on, where's my root beer?" She rolls her eyes as she makes her demands in a wincing and annoyed tone. In the end, both Wendy and Jesse are released, and they decide together to go to Waffle House.

In the third season, an episode entitled "Half Measures" opens with a montage of a day in the life of Wendy. The popular 1960s song "Windy" by The Association plays while Wendy moves from one John's vehicle to the next, giving blowjobs for drug and food money.⁶¹ The contrasted upbeat sound of the song with the darker theme of an addict hustling to survive in economies that devalue and denigrate her, and all the while exhibiting behaviors associated with immorality and "classlessness." She throws her gum out a car window in one scene, and in another, rinses her mouth with mouthwash, spitting it out on the asphalt of the motel parking lot. She is shown smoking meth in her motel room, holding a near-empty bag and sighing, then returning to the parking lot to work. In one segment, she throws a can of her, by this point, signature root beer at a John's car, after realizing that he has cheated her out of money. At the end of the montage and song, she is approaching the vehicle of two of Gus Fring's meth dealers with a bag of burgers, which she gives to them, in exchange for a discount on meth. The tone of the shot is *almost* of ridicule. However, by this point in the series, she has been presented as loyal to Jesse, who is, despite his perpetual tendency toward trouble, one of the protagonists of the series, and is beloved by viewers. At this point in viewership, the audience connects with Wendy through Jesse, as an ally.

Later in this episode, Jesse asks her to deliver poisoned burgers to the men, in an attempt to take revenge on them for killing his friend Combo.

"You okay with this, right? Just think of it like it's the same thing as always. You're just delivering some hamburgers."

⁶¹ The lyrics, "Who's peekin' out from under a stairway/ calling a name that's lighter than air/ who's bending down to give me a rainbow/ Everyone knows it's Windy...Who's tripping down the streets of the city/ smiling at everybody she sees/ who's reaching out to capture a moment? Everyone knows it's Windy," are both ironic, especially in their portrayal of psychedelic happiness likely informed by drugs, and fitting in their narrative of a child or child-like woman haphazardly making the rounds of a city in which everyone knows her.

"It's not just delivering hamburgers." she whimpers, slumped over and looking at the mattress of the motel bed upon which she sits. During this conversation, we learn that Wendy has a son whom she has lost, more than likely due to her addiction. The inclusion of familial relationships into Wendy's backstory creates further complexity in the work of making her an empathetic character. Jesse continues to cajole her:

"Hey, you got a kid, right? What's his name?"

"Patrick."

"Imagine these two guys had Patrick working as a mule, making him kill people. Wouldn't you do anything to protect your kid?"

"Of course I would. I'd do all kinds of things for him." Bourgois and Schonberg also describe the strained interaction of parenthood with addiction and its effects. They explain that drug addiction is often simply more powerful than kinship loyalty. The balance between a sense of obligation to family, especially offspring, and the power of extreme psychological and physiological addiction to illicit substances oscillates, but that ultimately, addicts almost always "[subordinate] responsibility for children to drug consumption" (199). Nevertheless, the moral associations of parenthood persist as a source of shame, guilt, and hope, too. Wendy's role as mother is touched on only in this moment in the series, and strongly elucidates the complexity of emotion surrounding kinship and drug addiction in lumpen lives. The costs of addiction come through in Wendy's statement, since there is no evidence that Wendy has any contact with Patrick, or even how old he is. One can guess that she has either lost custody of her son, or been estranged from him and a larger family due to her addiction.

"Okay, so, these guys using kids like that—they gotta go, right? Tomorrow. I'll be in touch." She remains on the bed of the motel room, staring into her lap, anxious and probably

concerned with the risk and ethical/moral conundrum of the task she's being put to by Jesse. He then leaves her with an absolutely enormous bag of meth. This scene quickly switches to one in which Walt is holding and playing with his infant daughter at home, again emphasizing the way in which other families and persons suffer for the continuing legacy of the White family.

Later, when Jesse has prepared the poisonous burgers for Wendy to deliver, she asks nervously,

"So is it, like, fast?" He tells her not to worry about the details, and reassures her that she'll be fine. She asks for "another bump" of meth to give her courage. Fortunately, Jesse's plan is thwarted at this moment, and Wendy is released of responsibility. She's neither saved nor damned by anyone over the course of the show, though she is frequently abused by men.

Wendy is the closest look at what represents the lumpen in *Breaking Bad*, and her characterization is compelling because it pushes against the typical representations of addicts and prostitutes. There is a certain comedic tone present in Wendy scenes, especially in the irony of the juxtaposition of the song "Windy" with her daily prostituting and its abuses, and in her uncompromising focus on attaining drugs. This humorous tone is complicated--it opens up a reading by audiences of the addict prostitute as a joke, not worth taking seriously. This tone potentially allows for further apathy regarding lumpen abuse. However, Wendy presents a humanity that reveals the exploitation she experiences as more than merely a result of her behavior and choices. She is both exploited and used by men, and capable of certain self-assertion. She is human; she is complex, but dependent upon her community to maintain her lifestyle, however toxic it is. By not pigeonholing this character, the show indicates the importance of lives of the lumpenproletariat, neither presenting a romantic view of morally upstanding lumpen, nor stereotyping addicts and sex workers as unthinking, immoral, social

monstrosities. Wendy's characterization adds to the critique of Walt as the embodiment of dominant white masculine capitalism. Giving Wendy a place in the action of the show creates a contrast between the misinterpretation of Walt as a victim, and truly exploited, failure-oriented lives, who are manipulated and oppressed by Walt and what he represents. Walter White's white heterosexual reproductivity, though strained by the illegality of his enterprise, is the normativity against which the lives of those affected by his empirical and mortal power are compared. The relationship between them is an important indicator of the way in which morality is irrelevant to making class distinctions and building solidarity.

Wendy and the many non-normative Others who are subordinated to Walter White over the course of the *Breaking Bad* series clarify Walt's role as capitalist exploiter in the illegal economy of drug manufacturing and sales. Despite Walt's introductory position as an underappreciated, underpaid, and underinsured high school teacher, and despite common readings of the series, he is not a proletarian hero of any kind. His actions are driven not by an interest in realizing positive change for workers, educators, or the underprivileged, but by an encompassing drive to reclaim his white, middle-class heterosexual masculine entitlement. His acquisition of wealth, power, and reputation (vis-à-vis the Heisenberg brand and persona) is made possible by the entitlement and privilege he possesses as a white male.

At the beginning of the series *Breaking Bad*, Walter White finds himself in a number of emasculated positions from which he seeks to rise: as a public school teacher, as husband to a non-submissive, outspoken wife, and as a "beta" male to his brother-in-law and his former business partner. His enthusiasm for the chemistry he teaches is real, but he views it as his rightful means to wealth and capitalist, even imperialist power. When he crosses over into the illegal drug economy, chemistry is the vehicle that catapults him back into a position of male

capitalist power. His entrance into methamphetamine production and distribution gives him dominion over a wide swath of working-class people who make up the population of low-level dealers, people of color and immigrants involved in the drug trade, and addicts, including women in many of these roles. On both sides of the law, the capitalist power structure maintains the primacy of white, male, heteronormativity.

As I have argued thus far, moralistic distinctions about the poor and the hard-living are a hindrance to a complete view of capitalist exploitation. Walter White's rise to wealth and power, both of which he believes he is entitled to (not justice or equality), shows the value of taking immoral people seriously. I don't mean that it is specifically important to include immoral people in some sort of working-class "us," since, economically speaking, morals do not determine class. The economic definition of the working class shows that the moral and immoral, by various criteria, have been part of it all along. Close attention to immorality, in this case involvement in illicit drugs, is not about comprehending why people are supposedly immoral, but about further understanding the capitalist system under which we all persevere.

Chapter Three

Classing Extreme Failure:

The Role of Abjection in Three Contemporary Novels

In 2011, a news story from Bellaire, OH, about an obese man who was removed from his home by rescue workers after sitting in a chair without moving for two years, went viral on Facebook and other social media sites. A Fox News online report from March 31, 2011, explains, "Officers who responded to the scene said that the man's skin was fused to the fabric of chair [sic] and that he was sitting in his own feces and urine with maggots visible" (NewsCore). In a video available through ABC online regarding the discovery of the man's condition, the camera lingers on the front yard of the home, tracking over debris on the ground, pieces of broken down appliances, and the contaminated, infested chair that the man was fused to for those two years. The slow camera movement fetishizes the scene in a manner akin to "disaster porn." The necessary anonymity of the man, upon whose actual visage we are unable to gaze upon in horror, is supplanted by this shot, which provides enough visual cues to evoke the imagination of the viewers. Along with the disembodied feminine voice of the newscaster reporting details over the scene, the images of detritus around the home conjure the sensory and emotional disgust, though fleetingly, of encountering abjection in the form of a living human body persisting in and slowly turning into, waste and rot.

The term "abjection" has become a key term in some areas of critical cultural analysis—especially in film studies engaging with horror, queer theory, and critical race studies, all of

which stand as distinct disciplines, even as they overlap. Most scholars working with abjection point to Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* as the catalytic moment for inviting abjection, and relatedly the ugly and disgusting, into critical analytical focus. Kristeva opens her introductory chapter, "Approaching Abjection," with an of-itself horror-conjuring intimation: "there looms with abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the unthinkable" (1). Kristeva continues to define the abject as a non-object, clarifying that "the abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (1). This configuration of Kristeva's explication creates a sense of abjection as a violently opposed, rejected and ejected outside, against which the self and subject is formed. Abjection repulses and causes recoil in the observer, because contact with or proximity to it threatens the self, one's sense of being oneself and a subject.

Similarly, Judith Butler discusses abjection in the introduction to *Bodies that Matter* as the relationship between the self and the outside, which creates subjecthood, positing in particular that sex and gender unintelligibility constitute the zone of abjection, and conversely, that being taken up in the process of "'assuming' a sex," and a gender, relatedly, places one inside, provides the "I" of subjecthood. Crucially, Butler asserts that "The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (3). The notion that abjection is densely populated may problematically suggest that there is a fixed "abject," rather than presenting a sense of abjection as a relationship that varies and shifts according to history, geography, identity, and class. Still, the fact that there are many who occupy abjected positions

in relationship to norms has class significance. The working class is huge, and the population in poverty, both in keeping with moralist norms and not, within the category of the working class is likewise highly populated. Furthermore, those who take up positions that are unthinkable within this hierarchy of abjected relationships are plenty, even if the people in this category live in isolation because of the extreme nature of their abjection.

Robert Phillips provides an important contextualization of abjection in relation to transgender people by emphasizing its exclusionary functions. He explains that “Abjection refers to the vague sense of horror that permeates the boundary between the self and the other” (19). Here, Phillips points to the affective response to Otherness that abjection causes. If abjection is not an object, then it is not the Other that constitutes what is abjected, but the buzzing threat of the self being invaded by that Other. Phillips continues, “In a broader sense, the term refers to the process by which identificatory regimes exclude subjects that they render unintelligible or beyond classification” (19). For Phillips, the concern with abjection is in the social rejection of transgender people and bodies, and the violence, both physical and psychological enacted upon them because of their supposed illegibility within the symbolic order of gender and sex. In this formulation, abjection is a tragic position upon which violence is enacted for the purpose of normative subjects’ self-preservation.

Conversely, many contemporary queer scholars pose abjection as a powerful platform from which to generate resistive speech and action. It is perceived by these scholars as a spectacular rejection of bourgeois capitalist behavioral and ontological hegemony. Proponents of abject performance and visual art perceive abjection as a concentrated source of affective and identificatory destabilization. Pointing back to Kristeva, Phillips notes that those who employ abjection as a resistive tool draw on the “crisis of meaning through which transformation is

possible” (20). The idea here is that the ensuing breakdown of the territory between the self and the other, and subsequently between the normative and legible and the non-or-anti-normative and illegible, though often a fleeting sensation within the observer, can move the borderline of the self as it rebuilds—hopefully toward more inclusive, non-violent boundaries for the person who inhabits the abjected position. Employing abjection in this way, for some critics, has what can be considered a dialectical effect; forcing abjection into view makes it less abjected, and makes the observer feel less violently in opposition to it, by way of forcing that observer to find legibility within it. It is reconciling.

Some scholars value the fear and disgust abject art and performance can evoke. This is because it can theoretically build a protective barrier between abjected individuals or social groups and those who represent norms and their oppressive regimes. In other words, recoiling away from abjection represented by the Other maintains and expands the distance between self and Other and normative and non-or-anti-normative so much that the violent recoil of the observer cannot reach the abjected person. Normative persons run away and leave the abjected alone. If disgust is meant to “shield us from contact with things that contaminate,” then there is some chance that the fear can give the contaminant a wide berth (Korsmeyer 754). The relationship of abjection to failure is its similar, but even greater distance from bourgeois norms of success. Here, social abjection represents not only the place of failure, but also a place at the very border of death and the loss of self. Abjection, like failure, can counter hegemony and does not participate in ideological reification. It also may trigger the normative to recoil away, abandoning its otherwise colonizing proximity. A problem with work on abjection thus far is that it is largely about employing abjection aesthetically, failing to take into account the times and places where it isn’t performative or artistic, but situational and material.

Even after the man in the chair died as a result of the two years he spent almost completely immobile, the language of these reports betrays the lack of objectivity in reporting on abjection, because of the affective disgust that erupts in response to contact with it. As Mojca Kuplen explains in her piece, “Disgust and Ugliness: a Kantian Perspective,” Kant’s perspective on disgust—again, argued from and against by critics of abjection—indicates that disgust is “a vital sensation connected particularly with the ‘lower’ senses of smell and taste,” and that it is not an intellectual cognitive function, though she argues that the visual (both in person and provoked within the imagination) enhances the experience (Kuplen 1). Kant is important to the discussion of abjection because his arguments about beauty have significantly impacted philosophical understanding of beauty and art against ugliness and disgust. Kuplen also references Aurel Kolnai’s configuration of disgust as an emotion, conditioned by both evolution and culture, and therefore not entirely pre-cognitive. Nevertheless, the experience of disgust at abjected substances occurs as instinct, even though it is, as Kuplen clarifies, “also clearly a cultural product” (Kuplen 3).

The scene of human degradation in this news story is too intense to maintain even the façade of journalistic objectivity. The Fox News online article begins by referencing the “morbidly obese man” who “lived with two able-bodied roommates - including his girlfriend,” emphasizing the virtual unthinkability of the story – that other people allowed this to happen; they lived, breathed, slept, and ate in such close proximity to such an abjected person, and the suggestion of a sexual relationship between this man and another person. The words are imbued with pure disgust.⁶²

⁶² I reproduce the viscerally evocative language here for the purpose of exhibiting its effect, but also because I am not immune to the immediate effect of the story on the imagination.

Another article about the incident, from a clearly sensationalist non-academic site called *Medical News Today*, declares that "a policeman described the scene as the worst he had ever seen. After helping the man get out of his chair, another officer said he had to throw away his uniform." Likewise, the city code manager expressed that "humans cannot live in such deplorable conditions" (Nordqvist). Both articles clarify that the landlady was unaware of how bad things were in the house, despite having visited the home, because the man covered himself in a blanket. This includes the landlady in the collective dehumanizations inferred by the suggestion that these conditions are animalistic or monstrous. Separately, news coverage of the situation has the effect of revealing how such filthy conditions are not especially noteworthy for some. Again, Mojca Kuplen quotes Kant's (certainly racist) suggestion about the cultural nature of disgust brought out by abject things: "'disgust at filth is only present in cultivated nations; the uncultivated nation has no qualms about filth'" (qt'd in Kuplen 3). It is possible that the landlady lacks concern for her poorer tenants, but I am more inclined to perceive the landlady's obliviousness as evidence of her familiarity with filth and squalor. Yes, we can read her position as that of a slumlord, but we might also understand her ignorance of the situation as a higher tolerance for sights and smells that others experience as unbearably disgusting.

This story complicates the dichotomy between visibility and invisibility of the Other. The story was shared thousands, if not millions, of times on social media, drawing a great deal of fleeting attention, fascination, and disgust. However, the story faded out of the media, and out of the minds of viewers and readers without, it seems, much political or critical interest or reclamation. There is no information available as to the man's occupation, if any, prior to his relative isolation and immobility, nor is there information about the occupation or income of his roommate and girlfriend before or after his death. One can suppose that they were poor, and

minimally employed, based on assumptions couched in regulatory expectations of hygiene and sanitation. If we are to use Marxist/ Zweigist definitions, these people are probably working class, because there is no sense that they own or could own any means of production. Yet working-classness perceived as an identity rather than an economic category configures a “type” into which these few people do not fit. The normative, dignified working-class imagined by scholars like Jack Metzgar cannot include someone who dies from ostensibly willful rotting in a heap of feces and maggots, nor can it include someone whose life is either ignorantly or willfully navigated around such conditions. This abjection is likewise not connected to the “hard-livers” who Rubin and Metzgar discuss in their work. They are true Others, and yet their apparently stifled sensitivity to the objects and substances that trigger disgust for most people is highly indicative of abjection’s cultural trigger; in this case, the trigger is inflected deeply by class. Poor people are far less likely to be able to maintain a buffer between themselves and abjection.

This incident is also not exactly what queer theorists imagine in perceiving failure or abjection as resistive or anti-normative. The man’s death exemplifies another side to what queer studies labels “the death drive.” The particularly elegant and romantic, if ultimately tragic, “utopian trace” in the dancer Fred Herko’s suicide, which Jose Muñoz discusses in the *Cruising Utopia* chapter entitled “A Jeté Out the Window,” is a compelling touchstone for understanding the contrast. Fred Herko, an avant-garde bohemian New York dancer active in the 1960s and 70s, leapt to his death in an elegant jeté out of the apartment window of his friend Johnny Dodd⁶³. Herko’s suicide was a spectacular juxtaposition of beauty and death in a purposeful queer gesture. Herko was a physically beautiful, extravagant dresser, and a beloved member of queer and artistic circles in his day, though he was actually homeless and couch-surfing at the

⁶³ It is important to note that Muñoz is working against Edelman’s profound negativity in his reading, by pointing to positivity and utopian possibility in queer non-normativity and even death.

end of his life, with little to no money or steady work. He was nevertheless a sort of community celebrity and beneficiary of a certain kind of bohemian privilege, because of his artistic notoriety and physical and sartorial appeal.

Muñoz uses similarly visceral language as the articles about the man in the chair use to describe Herko, but does so in a celebratory tone. He refers to Herko as a “gay speed freak” and a “drug addled dervish” (149), with a “junk store aesthetic” (163), all of which work to show Herko’s momentaneous utopian queer life and his suicide as an Agamben-esque “gesture”: “a moment when that overwhelming frame of a here and now, a spatial and temporal order that is calibrated against one, is resisted” (162). The language is in praise of Herko’s individual, rebellious character. This perspective of Herko and many other queer elders of the past is a sympathetic and fair one, because of its loving reclamation and valuation of those people who absolutely refused normativity at the cost of their own existence. However, this point of view is limited, and cannot be easily transposed onto many other histories of classed hardship or death. Muñoz acknowledges at the end of his work on Herko that death and suicide of queer people is ultimately tragic and not appreciable as merely performance without sorrowful consequences, especially for the queer community that loses a beloved person (167). Still, Muñoz poses Herko’s suicidal act as an example of the workings of queer desire and queer time—a moment of possibility that resists the here and now and all of its heteronormative and capitalist expectations, and which “moves beyond death as finitude” (149). It is difficult to read the life and death of the unnamed Ohio man rotting in his own feces in a chair as either queer or working-class resistance. His nameless suicide through a lack of self-care and horrific bodily debasement is failure, profoundly so, but it is not concerned with pleasure, resistance, or reclamation of anything. Rather than dancing out the window, a lightning-fast gesture of opening and possibility, this

man's death represents a slow closing-off of possibility, in which capitalist time is allowed to mow him over and under. While abjection in queer theory, like failure, has been useful in providing a basis for militancy and coagulation of resistive power, it is not always queerly instrumentalizable, as the story above shows. This has to do with class.

The popular media maintains a vexed relationship with abjection, both aesthetically purposeful and circumstantial. Most of the time, the media avoids deep connection with those on the social fringes—a pattern made evident by the continued representation of middle-and-upper-class families and their values on television. Working-class people, while represented (at least in name) on a number of television shows (and other media phenomena), are usually presented in rather tidy lives (as it is on the influential but ultimately normative *Roseanne*), with their actions culminating in some restoration of dignity and order at the end of every episode. When abjection draws attention, it is generally for the purpose of shocking the viewer with the spectacle of filth and horror, while ignoring class issues. Reality shows like *Hoarders* and *Cops*, and talk shows like *Jerry Springer* and *Maury Povich* are offered as explicitly voyeuristic gazes into lives of abjected Others, rather than as mirrors in which we might see ourselves or our possible selves reflected. Viewers are meant to revel in palpable disgust at those whose existence is so base in comparison with their own, even if the dividing lines constructed are imaginary. Audiences are not meant to consider class injustice when they view such abjected states of being.

In this chapter, my focus is on literature rather than visual media, and I consider and evaluate signals to abjection in three novels.⁶⁴ Importantly, abjection in these novels evokes differing forms of disgust—as Kuplen explains, there is a form of disgust called “animal

⁶⁴ Kristeva's work in *Powers of Horror* argues the special relationship of literature to abjection via signification, and Kuplen indicates that “literary art has the most power to manipulate the beautification of a disgusting topic.” In this, the literary form beautifies the ugly. Admittedly, this effect makes this discussion both prescient and slippery for talking against aestheticizing the abject for the purpose of reading for class politics.

reminder' disgust" (Kuplen 2), which is conjured by contact with or thought about the vile objects and substances that erupt from scenes of death or represent them. The physical conditions of the man in the chair—the urine, feces, and maggots that he sat in, not to mention sweat and sebum—represent this kind of disgust. The other form is "'social moral disgust,'" which pertains to violations of the spirit or dignity of a person (5). This is more along the lines of behavioral and moralistic disgust, or what Judith Butler points to as "zones within sociality...which a subject fantasizes as threatening its own integrity with the prospect of a psychotic dissolution ('*I would rather die than do or be that!*')" (emphasis mine).⁶⁵

The first novel I explore is the widely recognized working-class coming-of-age novel, *Bastard out of Carolina*, by Dorothy Allison; the second is a lesser-known, but comparable novel about poor rural Maine residents, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, by Carolyn Chute; and lastly, Sapphire's sparse but colossal *Push*, about a young black woman struggling with immeasurable abuse, stigma, and disadvantage. The three novels engage with abjection first in their preoccupation with physical malformation and extreme ugliness. This ugliness goes beyond lack of traditional beauty, and standards of attractiveness set forth in the Norm/ Norma ideals discussed in Julian Barnes' work, to portrayals of grotesque, horrific bodies. Likewise, the texts all deal with the proximity of working-class lives to filth and effluvia—waste and substances associated with death and disease. Finally, each text contains the trope of abjected motherhood, especially that which has been distorted or badly performed.

The characters I refer to as being or interacting closely with abjection in these texts defy the desire to perceive (and, for some, portray) the working-class and the very poor as respectable—a desire that is recuperative at its outset, but is also exclusionary, and is arguably

⁶⁵ This quotation is taken from endnote #2 to the introduction of Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, which has no pagination, but comes on the first page of the endnotes.

tantamount to capitulation to conservative moralism. The main characters here are failures—they are far outside middle-class norms of success. As was the case in my discussion of *Breaking Bad*, the kinds of failures I discuss here are not those that can be touted as rich in counter-cultural resistive potential. Nevertheless, failure persists as a trope that lines the diegesis of texts about gender, sexuality, race, and class. In these texts, failure takes extreme form in abjection.

Dorothy Allison, Carolyn Chute, and Sapphire each have been critical of the moralist divisions readers have drawn between characters who leave the scene of poverty and those who are left behind in both time and space. Despite the connecting themes of abjection across the three texts, there is an important difference between Allison's and Chute's portrayals of abjection, and Sapphire's. Allison's and Chute's characters purposefully reclaim disrespectability, failure, and abjection (as these are perceived in the mainstream). Though the abjection in the novels is not performative, the characters build self and community through phenomena that outsiders generally find repulsive. The characters in these two novels use abjection as resistance in the ways that queer theory often proposes. By contrast, Sapphire places her characters in a society and community wherein these experiences and characteristics isolate them, rather than bond them to others.

Part of the intervention of this dissertation is to recognize failure when it is not a choice, an affirmation of difference, or a conscious refusal. I've been looking at failure as sometimes a useful critique of class structures, and sometimes a tragic position that is not circumnavigable by way of passing or separating one's public self from a private one (that is, when failure is about identity rather than taste), as in the case of the queens represented in *Paris is Burning* and on the television reality game show, *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, who fail in both ways. Likewise, I have considered failure as a relationship to power, by discussing the crisis of white capitalist

masculinity and the extremes of its exploits in *Breaking Bad*. In this chapter, my focus is on failure through abjection. Abjection is no less unwieldy in this work than it is in other scholarship. Still, the importance of bringing my discussion of failure to the sort of vanishing point of abjection is to think about how the farthest, most tattered edges of failure are classed. Significantly, however, it is meant to indicate abjection as having varying and different effects on the lives of different kinds of poor working-class people. Death is a kind of failure.

The following analyses grapple with the morally and physically abjected in society, who are also among the working-class poor. They are neither anomalies nor necessarily common. I also discuss the relative nature of abjection, which is influenced by class as well. The proximity to abjection for the working-class people in the novels I discuss alters their perspective of it, even if readers maintain an expected level of disgust at it. The argument against the moralism and focus on respectability in working-class studies gets decidedly messy in the face of the behaviorally and personality-based anathema of destructive, cruel, and abusive working-class personalities. Likewise, the norms of decorum, hygiene, cleanliness held by some working-class scholars cause them to recoil away from people and things that are extreme in their non-compliance with these codes. Here, I am referring to abjection that is neither performative, nor bohemian counter-culturalism, neither of which do I wish to completely disavow, but to set aside. What I am looking at is abjection that retains some queer nature, but in which class is the stronger determinant for both the observer and the observed. The "look away" instinct toward "ugly," "filthy," or "bad" people, especially women, people of color, and sex and gender non-normative people, is pervasive. But looking away does not eliminate the fact of abjection and the abjected people who make up parts of the underclasses.

Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, the coming-of-age story of Bone, a young girl growing up queer in South Carolina among working-class people, is a fictionalized version of Allison's own life story as a sexual and physical abuse survivor. Throughout the novel, Bone reflects on the complicated dichotomy of feelings she has about belonging and being an outsider to her southern working-class family and community. She does not know who her father is, though her tight-lipped mother struggles throughout the novel to have the "illegitimate" designation removed from Bone's birth certificate. She's described as ugly, manly, weird, and wild because of her racialized appearance, which comes from her supposedly Cherokee great-grandfather, and her unusual, hard demeanor. Bone takes pride in her ugliness, and relishes the ugliness of family members, especially her grandmother and younger cousin, Little Earle. She is attracted and relates to the ugly in friends as well, especially in her classmate Shannon Pearl. Though Bone is devoted to her family, and smitten with the men and women who comprise her extended family, even and especially those who stand out as hard, rough, or mean, she is independent from her immediate family (mother, sister, stepfather). Bone is also smart, angry, and queer.

From the very beginning of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, ugly bodies and ugly behavior are sources of identification in the impoverished Boatwright family and their community. There is a great deal of love attached to ugliness in this novel—affection for the ugly that is not romanticized or made euphemistic. Ugliness appears in various contexts and in various extremes throughout, but is expressed in its excessive and extreme forms almost as *jouissance*. It is always a point of identification for Bone, even though ugliness in the extremes that Allison depicts is an abjected position.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Physical attractiveness is also evident in the family, but is something of a burden to those who possess it. Bone's mother Anney is notably physically beautiful, though it is remarked upon as a fleeting trait of the young. The uncles

Tellingly, the focus on physical ugliness pertains primarily to children. The first instance of narrative focus on a child's ugliness is when Bone's cousin, Little Earle is introduced. Little Earle is a dirty, sticky, and sickening toddler, who "would lope like a crippled crawfish" as he moved (19). Bone reminisces about the family reveling in Little Earle's hideousness: "Naked, dimpled all over, fat and brown and wide, his stubborn little body bulged with determination, and his little-boy prick bounced like a rubber toy between his bow-legged thighs as he whooped and ran" (19). Bone's narration here gleefully recounts the young boy's physical repulsiveness, repeating the word "ugly" like a mantra, increasing in intensity and rendered disgust.

Bone's grandmother, the occasionally powerful, often mean matriarch of the Boatwright family, exudes joy about Little Earle's ugliness as though it is the most desirable characteristic a child might have. Bone describes her grandmother's effusiveness about Little Earle's appearance:

Granny covered her mouth with one hand to hide her teeth. "You ugly little boy," she teased Little Earle, almost laughing between her words. "You ugly, ugly, ugly little thing"... "ugly, ugly, ugly, ugly! You so ugly you almost pretty"... "you are just the ugliest thing!" Granny rocked forward and caught her hands under Little Earle's arms, swinging him up off his feet and directly before her face... She pressed her mouth against his midriff and blew fiercely so that her lips vibrated against Little Earle's navel—a bubble-bubble roar that made him shriek and bounce and giggle a high-pitched wail of hysterical laughter. (20)

It is possible to conclude that Granny is slinging a kind of verbal abuse at the child, and that repeatedly calling her grandson ugly is cruel, causing probable future self-esteem issues.

However, the grandmother expresses deep affection for him, not in spite of, but because of his

Bone adores are also described as relatively handsome, particularly her uncle Earl Boatwright, who she likens to Elvis Presley. However, ugliness is part of the family, and is a peculiarly prized physical trait, personality trait, and defense mechanism.

ugliness. His ugliness is stunning and extreme, and it makes Granny fawn over him, so much so that Bone wants to draw her grandmother's affections, too, by becoming equally ugly. Likewise, she bonds with her grandmother by repeating her words: "'Ugly,' I repeated, and buried my face in her dress... 'Almost pretty. Oh you're a Boatwright all right, a Boatwright for sure.' I laughed up into her neck. Granny was ugly herself, she said so often enough, though she didn't seem to care" (20-21). Granny has an apparently vexed relationship to her own physical flaws, since she self-consciously covers her teeth while talking. This indicates that she cares about her appearance in ways that the young Bone can't yet perceive. Granny nonetheless celebrates Little Earle for his appearance, and Bone mimics this appreciation of ugliness as a positive trait. Bone's grandmother dwells on and celebrates the ugliness of her grandson as a marker of his belonging to her matrilineage, wherein her own ugliness is passed down to her family line. Even though Granny suggests that the ugliness is "almost pretty," it is the grossness of Little Earle that pleases her. Similarly, it is ugliness that Bone loves in her grandmother; she aspires to this ugliness in order to solidify her identity as a Boatwright.

The most captivating and prolonged study of ugliness and Bone's attraction to it is in her very fraught friendship with her classmate Shannon Pearl. Shannon is as physically revolting as a character can be without being a monster: "Shannon had the white skin, white hair, and pink eyes of an albino" (155). Shannon is the daughter of a Christian bookstore manager and booking agent for traveling gospel groups. Throughout the narrative, the Pearls reflect the hypocrisy of supposed Christian values held by people in her community. Bone expresses the perverse and playful relationship she has with religion through her connection to the Pearls. At school, Shannon is extremely unpopular. She is bullied because of her physical abnormalities, and she is mean and cold toward her classmates in response. She is less unfriendly toward Bone, however.

Bone and Shannon are friends by default, connected by their mutually outcast social positions and a shared disdain for their peers. Their relationship is based primarily on evident reciprocal attraction to and resentment of one another.

Bone is drawn to Shannon and risks isolation and bullying by becoming the only one of Shannon's classmates who allows Shannon near her on the bus. She admires Shannon's resolve in being unliked:

I watched her face—impassive, self-sufficient, and stubborn; she reminded me of myself, or at least the way I had come to think of myself. Sweat was showing through her dress, but nothing showed in her face except for the eyes. There was fire in those pink eyes, a deep fire I recognized, banked and raging. (154)

Shannon's attitude—that of rage and stoicism stemming from abuse—is familiar and captivating to Bone. Shannon's ugliness is appealing to Bone because of its severity. It is an exaggerated version of the ugliness granny loves in Little Earle and others, and an outward reflection of Bone's own inward state. She is also full of rage, like Shannon. Bone's focus on Shannon's eyes and their "fire" signifies Bone's strangely erotic attraction to Shannon. The two girls share that fire too—a symbol of passion in both. Fire in the eyes compels Bone to Shannon. She tells us, "There had to be something wrong with me, I was sure, the way I went from awe to disgust where Shannon was concerned...I belonged to her in a funny kind of way" (155). Here, Bone inadvertently describes her interest in Shannon in nearly perfect mirroring of Kristeva's terms with regard to abjection. That is to say, Kristeva describes "the abject" as a phenomenon that "simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject," indicating its attractiveness to the subject

that is then overtaken by it.⁶⁷ While Shannon's mother sees her daughter as some kind of miracle from God, the rest of the community responds to Shannon as though she is a demon or a devil, because she is so ugly.

Bone's vexed attraction to Shannon also begins as a mode of rebellion against Christian moralism. Bone explains, "Just the way [the other kids] stared at me made me forget all my newly made vows to behave like a good Christian; their contemptuous, angry faces made me want to start a conversation with Shannon and shock them all" (154). There is irony in the circumstance that makes Bone's kindness to Shannon as indication of her immorality. The exclusivity of what comprises Christian behavior is evident here. Bone wryly points out that the community and her peers' Christ-like love is explicitly not to be extended to someone as physically and socially abhorrent as Shannon. The abuse Bone has endured and her allegiance to Boatwright ugliness, as well as her intrinsic awareness of her own queerness makes Shannon like an inverted Platonic ideal. Shannon Pearl is like a physical manifestation of Bone's perversity. Shannon should not be alive—should not exist. Bone's illegitimacy and Shannon's unlikely survival after premature birth, and her physical abnormality indicate the liminal existence for both, wherein neither belongs where they are. Shannon's mistreatment of Bone only strengthens Bone's connection and empathy.

Shannon's sickening physical appearance is the subject of repeated and excited talk by Bone and other characters in the story; Allison herself appears to enjoy the excesses of language in creating the repugnant figure of Shannon Pearl. Bone gives a more complete description of Shannon shortly following the scene on the school bus: "Shannon was wholly monstrous, a

⁶⁷ I have chosen to write about abjection as a relationship, rather than a thing that can be called "*the* abject," because I am discussing its relative nature. However, the translation of Kristeva I draw from here uses the more fixed terminology of "the abject."

lurching hunched creature shining with sweat and smug satisfaction. ” Bone illustrates that, in contrast, Shannon’s mother is wholeheartedly in denial about Shannon’s repugnance: “‘My own precious angel is just a miracle child’...‘Why she was so frail at birth we never thought the Lord would let her stay with us. But now look at her. In my own Shannon you can just see how God touches us all’” (155). Mrs. Pearl’s praise of Shannon’s “miraculous” survival is ironic and sad, because it points to Shannon’s main source of suffering as evidence of God’s influence on their lives. Though Mrs. Pearl perceives her daughter’s existence as evidence of God’s love, the torture Shannon endures from her classmates and others indicates how little God (or the possibility of good things) is present in the lives of abjected persons like Shannon and Bone.

Bone eventually rejects Shannon by calling her ugly. She tells her, “‘You’re God’s own ugly child and you’re gonna be an ugly woman... You ugly thing,’ I went on, ‘You monster, you greasy cross-eyed stinking sweaty-faced ugly thing... Ugly... ugly... ugly’” (171-172). Here, Bone casts Shannon off, but she does so using the very same language she adores hearing from her grandmother. She uses the word “ugly” to describe Shannon in precisely the same way that her grandmother praises little Earle. This term and its repetition have been established as loving words. Here, Bone rejects Shannon, but she can’t let go, using words of love to cast her aside.

In addition to Bone’s love of ugliness, she and her community, especially the Boatwright family, are comfortable with and forthcoming about the bodily substances that elicit disgust in many people. There’s a near-giddiness with which Bone and her family approach the intensity of the body’s smells, sounds, waste, and sexual processes, as well as those of death. Because the poor are notably less likely to have proper health care and access to medicines, good food, and various other amenities that affect physical well-being, they may have a closer relationship with the materiality of unhealth.

The novel is replete with persistent references to “piss,” and we learn fairly early from Bone’s Aunt Alma that the one and only time Bone met her real father, she “let loose and pissed a pailful all down his sleeves, the front of his shirt, and right down his pants halfway to his knees. You peed all over the son of a bitch!” (25). This shows the use-value of the vile as a kind of defense for the family, and the extent of their comfort with it. Similarly, the family jokes around at the dinner table about imagined meals concocted from terrible and vomitous matter. Anney tells Bone and her sister Reese, “‘We used to pass the plates around the table...talking about food we’d never seen...Earle liked the idea of parboiled puppies. Your Aunt Ruth always talked about frogs’ tongues with dewberries...But Raylene won the prize with her recipe for sugar-glazed turtle meat with poison greens and hot piss dressing.’” Bone continues: “After a while Reese and I started making up our own pretend meals. ‘Peanut butter and Jell-O. Mashed bug meat with pickles.’ Mama made us laugh with her imitations of her brothers and sisters fighting over the most disgusting meals they could dream up” (72-73). Of course, this is not awfully unlike what a lot of children do—inventing gross-out scenarios and abject humor are common in children’s play. It also displays a family bonding over the disgusting—much of which is designed to induce feelings of queasiness and repulsion, and which is part of the everyday backdrop of their world of rural poverty.

The Boatwrights are also especially open about death, disease, and disfigurement. There is a relationship that the poor have developed with death that might be perceived by others as morbid. The argument here is not to suggest that this proximity to morbidity is a valuable commodity poor people have that others do not. It is not my intention to justify in any way the disenfranchisement of poor people in terms of health and livelihood.

The proximity to death in *Bastard out of Carolina* also conveys a kind of abjected womanhood in its matrilineal genealogy, with troubled and “bad” motherhood in play as a theme. The abjection of motherhood/childbirth and death cohere in the novel through the repeated trope of infanticide and dead babies. Dead babies constitute abjected matter. The first instance of this is when Bone's mother loses her child with Daddy Glen. This occurs directly follows the scene when Daddy Glen first molests Bone. Glen returns to the vehicle where Bone and Reese are waiting: "'Your mama's gonna be alright.' He paused...'But she ain't gonna have no more babies [...] my baby's dead. My boy. My boy.' I wrapped my arms around Reese and held on, while in the front seat, Glen just sobbed and cried" (48). Glen is heartbroken by the lost opportunity for his genetic line and continuation of his patriarchal lineage.

Glen's response to the loss of his child, his son, is far more emotional than what is projected by the women in the family. Anney and her sisters convene at Anney's house to care for her (her body in recovery, specifically). Here, the history of lost babies is presented in matrilineal resignation. This is not to suggest that the women are unfeeling. The coming together of the sisters to "heal the heart" of their sister strongly indicates the level of emotion they possess for one another. However, the women are able to face the reality of infant death because of their consistent proximity to it. Aunt Raylene, a masculine and gruff character that Bone relates to tells Bone and her sister, "'When a woman loses her baby, she needs to know that her other babies are well and happy'" (49).

The constancy of infant mortality is further related when Bone states:

They did name him Glen Junior, Reese told me. She had heard Aunt Ruth and Aunt Alma talking. They had buried the baby in the Boatwright plot Great-grandma Shirley owned, with the four boys Granny had lost and Ruth's stillborn

girls and Alma's first boy. Glen had wanted a plot of his own but had no money to buy one and that seemed to be the thing that finally broke his grief and turned it to rage. (49)

I read Allison's writing about bodily waste and death and the position of abjection through Martin Jay's discussion in his 1994 article "Abjection Overruled." Jay writes that abjection:

encompasses all of those bodily wastes...that anticipate the culminating moment when the total body becomes waste through its transformation into a corpse. It is also manifest culturally in tabooed food, 'perverse' or incestuous sexuality, violent crime, and religious notions of abomination and sacrilege in anything in fact that threatens rigid boundaries and evokes powerful fears of filth, pollution, contamination and defilement. (238)

There's a celebratory quality here, but it's not the kind of grasping at cultural capital that Jay understands artists of abjection to be drawing on. That is to say that Allison's characters aren't trying to shock people or dismantle anything (nor are Chute's, nor Sapphire's), even if the authors are. Abjection, for these characters, is a material proximity based on their classed circumstances.

The dead baby trope continues throughout the novel. In discussing the especially strong racism of another family in their community and how Bone's darker features incite racist speculation from others in the town, Bone's Aunt Alma jokes about infanticide committed by the Yarboro family. Bone relates:

People were crazy on the subject of color, I knew, and it was true that one or two of the cousins had kinky hair and took some teasing for it...Michael Yarboro swore to me that Cherokees were niggers anyway, said Indians didn't take care who they married like white folks did... "Oh, lots of care they take," Aunt Alma

hooted. "The Yarboros been drowning girls and newborns for surely two hundred years." (54)

Here, there is potentially a juxtaposition between the Yarboros, who are reputed baby-killers, and the Boatwrights who lose babies at birth or in infancy. This distinction seems like a moral one, except that Alma laughs about it. She's not disgusted or horrified; rather, she's bemused at their hypocrisy. For Aunt Alma, the Yarboros' infanticide is a quirk (along with their racism), rather than a fault. It may also hint toward miscegenation or inbreeding, since the phenomenon is stereotypically connected with southern U.S. culture. Alma doesn't condemn the Yarboros outright; she merely laughs at their hypocrisy. The inclusion of this exchange and reflection on another family in the community furthers the death trope of the text and further immerses the novel's working-class community in abjected surroundings—ground where death and the remains of dead children and babies are plenty.

Kristeva writes about the fact of motherhood within the Oedipal configuration as the first instance of the "casting off" of another body in order to define the self—the child casts off the mother in order to gain its subjectivity. The body of the mother represents the "not-I" against which the child is defined. All the functions of the Oedipal in Kristeva's definitions of abjection are posed as pre-ideological, pre-cultural, and therefore, pre-moral. Neither the truth nor even the formulaic sensibility of Kristeva's theory are of concern here, but the way in which mothers are placed outside the legible here speaks to the way moralist codes of behavior apply to maternal relationships. That is to say that mothers especially, more than fathers or other family figures, are expected to have and maintain loving relationships with their children, and to exhibit fierce protectiveness of them. Likewise, mothers are not only expected to show *willingness* to sacrifice themselves, their happiness, and pleasures for their children; they are expected to

actually *do it*. Kristeva's psychoanalytical presentation of the mother/child relationship as the origin of abjection and my discussion here of maternity behaving in disappointing, peculiar, or shocking ways are admittedly loosely connected. Still, while I am not concerned with whether or not Kristeva's argument is correct or appropriately feminist, I reference Kristeva for the purpose of examining the elements that make up what is abjected according to prevailing cultural theory, and how those things are received differently in accordance with class identities. That is to say, I am thinking about how what is abject, and how it is thought about or agonized over, is received matter-of-factly by some—those who do not have the economic cushioning to maintain proxemic separation from abjection.

Anney *does sacrifice* herself, but it is for Glen, and not Bone or Reese. As Glen's anger takes over the home, Bone relates that her Mama "just got quiet, more and more quiet all the time" (110). It is not outside expectations of women to submit to the desires of men, but it is outside what is expected of mothers to remain passive when their children are harmed or abused. Anney, though she is loving, ultimately does *not* protect her children from Daddy Glen, when he storms around the house enraged, frightening both Bone and her younger sister, Reese: "When Daddy Glen beat me, there was always a reason, and Mama would stand right outside the bathroom door. Afterward, she would cry and wash my face and tell me not to be so stubborn, not to make him mad" (110). When Daddy Glen beats Bone so hard that he breaks both her collarbone and her tailbone, Anney becomes angry and leaves Glen, but only temporarily (113-115). She defies normative motherhood by returning time and again to the scene of extreme danger for her children.

By the time Bone is twelve, Daddy Glen beats her regularly. When the family finds out, Anney responds with shamed resignation: "I love him..." (246). Later, Anney finds Daddy Glen

with Bone just after he's raped her—she sees it happening—and yells "You bastard! You monster!" She commences to take Bone to the hospital, but turns back to Daddy Glen, who is banging his head on the side of their car. Anney cries "Help me, God" before she essentially abandons Bone. In her pain, Bone expresses the depth of this maternal betrayal: "Rage burned in my belly and came up my throat. I'd said I could never hate her, but I hated her now for the way she held him, the way she stood there crying over him. Could she love me and still hold him like that?...I wanted everything to stop, the world to end, anything, but not to lie bleeding while she held him and cried" (291). Here, Anney's sympathetic response to Daddy Glen after he rapes Bone is shocking. In general, sexual abuse is considered egregious, even as it reflects dominant patriarchal power over women's and girls' sexuality, and so readers likely expect Anney to protect and avenge Bone. Bone's rage here makes sense, morally and moralistically, because her mother fails her at the worst moment of her life.

Surprisingly, however, Bone ultimately reconciles with Anney, though she does not return to her life with her mother and Daddy Glen. At the end of the novel, Anney visits Bone at Aunt Raylene's home, where she now lives. Bone relates:

My heart broke all over again. I wanted my life back, my mama, but I knew I would never have that. The child I had been was gone with the child she had been. We were new people, and we didn't know each other anymore. I shook my head desperately...Mama's hands stroked my hair back off my face, cupped my head, held me safe. I pressed my face into her neck, and let it all go. The grief. The anger. The guilt and the shame. It would come back later. It would come back forever. We had all wanted the simplest thing, to love and be loved and be safe together, but we had lost it and I didn't know how to get it back. (307)

While it may be fleeting, in this moment, Bone expresses compassion for Anney, her family, and even Daddy Glen, when she invokes their shared desire for love and safety. Likewise, Bone's reaction to Anney indicates that the Boatwrights' expectations of family and maternal care are different from the norm. Yes, they desire the warm safety of love and family, but Bone and her family know, because of where and who they are and the class they belong to, that those hopes are distant. Again, it's not that Bone feels that Anney was justified or had no choice but to return to Daddy Glen. Nor is it true that every Boatwright woman or South Carolinian working-class mother would make the same choice as Anney. The point is that the choice she made is not as unfathomable in the class and geography they inhabit as it is for most. The reunion between Anney and Bone does not indicate reconciliation, but it does suggest Bone's resignation to a much different sense of motherhood than the norm.

In Carolyn Chute's novel, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, the main character and intermittent first person narrator, Earlene Pomerleau, grows up in a working-class household with her father and grandmother. Lee, Earlene's father, is a carpenter, and Earlene takes pride in the work he's done to improve their home. Her mother has been hospitalized with an unnamed mental illness and appears in the novel only briefly (during Christmas time) when Earlene is young. Just as in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, this text presents abjection as a non-noteworthy, matter-of-fact element of its characters' lives. In Dorothy Allison's novel, readers are immediately placed inside Bone's working-and-poverty-class South Carolina. Bone is an insider to this life, so readers enter the scene as insiders as well. However, Chute's narrative is much more complex. Earlene's working-class childhood is still distinct from the Beans' working-yet-impoverished circumstances, even though they are neighbors. It is only later that Earlene becomes an insider in the abjected Bean life, by marrying into the family.

Earlene is fascinated with the Beans as a child. She introduces us to the family as an outsider, watching them through the windows of her home and from the safety of her front yard. The gaze that rests on the Bean family—that of Earlene's father and grandmother, and of Earlene herself—is one of judgment and moralism, but also one of desire (at least on the part of Earlene). The Beans' lives are at first held at a distance, definitively the “not-I” to Pomerleau subjectivity. Their lives are peculiar, even as Chute implies authorial preference or reverence for how the Beans live and what their lives entail. The Beans, a family that lives across the street from the dignified Lee and his family, represent the "bad poor," in contrast. The Beans are more than the "hard-living" members of the lower classes, however. Chute depicts the Beans as more animal than human, both in the eyes of others in their community and in Chute's choice of diction. Chute appears to hold no judgment over her characters, however, despite their characterization as beasts.

Lee warns Earlene that "the Beans are uncivilized animals. PREDATORS, he calls 'em...A million times Daddy says, 'Earlene, don't go over on the Beans' side of the right-of-way. Not ever!'" (3-4). Earlene's father and grandmother often talk about the Beans as though they are animals, and they express fear of the Beans, which supports a view of them as predatory. Chute's Beans are at times depicted as dog-like or rat-like in their living habits. They live in squalor, the men lack hygiene and behave in violent and reactionary ways, and the women are perpetually pregnant or homebound, lacking agency in their own sexuality and economic circumstances. As a group, the Beans often seem pre-verbal, as though relics from past times, or like pre-historic humans. The Beans are not portrayed as villains or even as pathetic figures, however. Chute's depiction is devoid of moralism; the rural life of the Bean family is portrayed as a legitimate and

viable, if difficult, mode of living, and it is even shown as beautiful at times. For Chute, the Beans are not in need of fixing or rescuing.

Chute argues in interviews that the "filth" the Beans live in and that reviewers commented upon in reviews of the book that came out shortly after the first version, was imaginary. In the 1985 *New England Review and Breadloaf Quarterly*, Chute tells her interviewer, "People imagined things in the book that weren't there, like incest between the father and daughter, and filth—that everybody was filthy...the filth—that was another thing that absolutely killed me. There's a man who picks up auto parts and gets his hands black and he doesn't carry around little towelettes...and wash his hands each time he touches a car..." (173-174). Chute's statements about how readers misunderstand her characters are compelling, and I bring them in specifically to exhibit the classed nature of abjection. I don't cite motor oil or other work-related dirtiness as abject, because as a scholar of the working class, I am trained to perceive that kind of dirt and sweat as "natural" or "ordinary". Other reviewers, of another class, certainly, are not. Still, there are elements of Bean life that readers instinctively categorize as filth, which Chute refuses to see as such. The Beans, though fictional, are composites of people Chute knows and loves and sees in her community in rural Maine. I would guess that Chute feigns her surprise at reviewer responses to the Beans. Nevertheless, her insistence that the Beans are not unusual in the level of dirt and grime they subsist in is deeply indicative of how abjection has a classed character. She describes her characters' surroundings in ways that repulse readers and reviewers, inciting them to moral insolence, while she herself finds her characters "beautiful" and "my people" (173-174).

Chute explains that reviewers referred to Ruben Bean, the novel's most repellant, fear-inducing character, as "a psychopath," and that "he was on the other side of the fence." She

laments that this perspective made her feel as though readers "weren't going to feel for him anymore" (169). Chute perceives even her most antagonistic character as nonetheless worthy of compassion—even respect.

Critics have likewise remarked that the animalistic qualities of the Beans indicated in Chute's prose is dehumanizing and insulting to the working-class and constitutes an unfair portrayal of rural life. When reviewers label Chute's characters as being like animals, they take their cues from her own writing, her own metaphors. But they perceive the Beans' animalistic nature as abhorrent, abjected, and shameful; Chute, and the people of Maine after whom the Beans are modeled, perceive it as simply natural. The Beans, to Chute and others, are "average, everyday people" (168).

Her surprise at reviewers' harshness toward the Beans is betrayed by one of her answers to a question from interviewer Ellen Lesser. Lesser asks: "In the novel, you've got two opposing sides or forces: Earlene Pomerleau and the Beans. Which did you start with?" Thinking about the two sides as opposing forces creates a sense of the I and "not-I" of the abjection relationship.

Chute responds: "You have to have one to have the other. I mean somebody has to view the Beans. Someone has to be mad about it—not that Earlene was so much, but her father—to have them be what they were. If you had just zoomed right in on them and there was nobody that was going to say 'yuck', then there wouldn't be that tension" (165). In this, Chute shows she *does* know that her characters are repulsive to some people, even if they are not to others. That Lee Pomerleau, Earlene's father, is a very traditionally "respectable," working-class man, who hates his also hard-working, but markedly less respectable and upstanding neighbors, shows a bit of the hard-versus-stable-living distinction at work. However, the proximity of their living—directly across the street—indicates that they are not worlds apart in terms of economics. The

difference between the two is not class; it is moralistic and superficial. That Earlene is taken into the Bean family with her marriage to Beal indicates that even the moralist dividing lines—the liminal boundary between the respectably working-class self and the abject Other of the Beans—is highly porous. That is why it is so important for scholars to eschew moral dividing lines, even if those upstanding working-class people do not. Saying "yuck" and looking away denies the validity of members of the lower-classes whose ways of life and being deserve attention.

As in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, there is a kind of focused attention on ugliness in *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*—that of the Bean men especially, as large and rough men with poor hygiene and tattered clothing. Likewise, Chute gives the reader a look into the bodily abjection of the Beans. They reside in filthy places, amidst rotten and rotting bodies and structures. Chute allows her readers to witness Earlene and the Beans persisting in close proximity to physical processes and bodily effluvia. This is more extreme than in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, wherein homes are in decay, but the characters attempt to improve their living conditions. The Beans housing situation is Hooverville-esque, held together by scrap material (plywood, tarpaper) and the subject of voyeuristic gaze. While it seems as though the Bean men are employed as loggers, etcetera, the family nevertheless lives in conditions generally associated with extreme poverty and unemployment. Their living conditions might seem akin to homelessness to outsiders.

Again, the Beans are depicted as being dogs, rats, bears, and other non-human animals associated with unclean living and excessive breeding. Though their dog-like qualities are initially introduced through Lee Pomerleau's loathing of the Beans, the depiction continues through Earlene's account of her experiences as she integrates into the family, and the third person narrator whose position in relation to the Beans is detached and somewhat neutral. Earlene's fixation on her neighbors begins with her noting how large they are, initiating the

perception of them as animals—she watches them as though they are wild beasts out in nature. She does not label them as “ugly” the way Dorothy Allison does her Boatwrights. The animal metaphors Chute uses evoke a similar kind of recoil, though—in this case, more strongly of fear and horror than outright disgust. Chute uses all capital lettering to indicate Earlene’s visceral response to witnessing their bear-like size. She explains, "Through the open window I hear the door of the Beans' mobile home peel open like it's a can of tuna fish. I see a BIG BEAN WOMAN come out and set a BIG BEAN BABY down to play among boxes of truck parts and a skidder wheel..." (6). The nameless Bean woman is so large that her presence and that of her child warrants the enlarged lettering. Her physical form makes the home look like a tin can, while the child is sent to play in a junkyard like a dog. "A BIG BEAN" is like a species name—an indication of their non-human nature. Later, after her grandmother shames and berates her father for sharing a bed with Earlene, Earlene relates: "I like my side of the bed best. I can, without taking my head up off the pillow, look out across at the Beans' if I want. As I look out now I see a pickup truck backin' up to the Beans' barn. A BIG BEAN MAN gets out and lifts a spotted tarpaulin. It's two dead bears" (7). The Beans seem like giants to the child Earlene, and she must observe them from a distance as though they are wild animals in order to stay safe from whatever harm they might inflict. That the Bean man reveals the dead bears as the contents of his truck also creates the sense that these giants are formidable and dangerous, as well as wild.

Similarly, the small Bean children, who exist in unnamed droves, are depicted like litters of puppies or rats. Early on in the novel, a few of the Bean children are digging an impressively large hole in their yard, presumably to play in. Earlene describes them:

About four huge heads come out of the hole. It's a hole the Bean kids and Bean babies have been working on for almost a year. Every day they go down the hole

and they use coffee cans and a spade to make the hole bigger. The babies use spoons. Beside the hole is a pile of gingerbread color dirt as tall as a house. I say, "Need any help with the hole!!?" They don't answer. One of 'em wipes its nose on its sleeve. They blink their fox-color eyes. (11)

In this scene, the Bean children act in dumb unison, popping up out of their hole in the ground like moles (though she indicates their fox-colored eyes). Earlene refers to the one who moves (to wipe snot) as "it," as though the child is an animal. Likewise, the children's peculiar silence as Earlene addresses them (loudly and excitedly, since she knows she's not supposed to speak to them) creates a sense of them as non-verbal; like animals, they seem mute and dumb as they look blankly back at Earlene.

When the narrative switches from Earlene's point of view to the third person view of Egypt, Maine life, the language describing the Beans as animal-like persists. This shows that the perception of them as beasts is not just Earlene's. When Chute's narrative enters the section entitled "Merry, Merry," titled after the Bean woman who is apparently intellectually disabled (probably Down's Syndrome) and non-verbal, two main Bean characters come to the forefront of the narrative. Beal Bean, Merry Merry's son, and Roberta Bean, Beal's aunt with whom Beal primarily stays, and who gives birth to a number of Beal's children, are the subject of much of the focus of the novel, along with the aforementioned Ruben Bean, the violent and intimidating patriarch of the Bean family. Beal and Roberta's interactions and relationship expresses the animal-like manner of Bean life and family sociality: "Beal Bean comes into the low-ceilinged room where his Auntie Roberta lies on a mattress with her new baby and her old baby. Beal's black dog, Jet, stands back out of the light, her bluish tongue fluttering. Jet is pregnant again" (27). In this, the dog and Auntie Roberta are two of a kind—both essentially breeders, Jet with

yet another litter of puppies on the way, and Roberta with her own litter of human babies, siblings clearly conceived and birthed with little to no time in between. Both mothers lounge on the ratty mattress, waiting to give birth again.

Though the Bean women are more dog-like in depiction, men are the most frequently described as bears or bear-like. Chute uses the comparison to indicate the enormous size of the Bean men, as well as their hirsute, wild-man appearances. The bear imagery also works to indicate the naturally predatory nature of the Bean men, which Chute is likewise forgiving of. The Bean men, as natural predators, are also sexual predators and violators of Bean women and others. Just as Daddy Glen's abuse of Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina* is not compelling to me as an example of abjection, for the reason that it is not outside patriarchal normativity, the Bean men's abuse of women doesn't contradict the norm and isn't abjected in my terms. However, the responses of women to abuse in the book are abjected in their nature. This comes through especially in Earlene's years-long depression following the birth of her child by Beal Bean. Earlene's rape by Beal Bean is followed by an extended period of convalescing in filth.

Earlene's early fascination with the Beans, against the warnings and worry of her father, who is repulsed by and despises the Beans, primes readers to perceive a relationship between Earlene and Beal Bean as inevitable. Their first sexual encounter, in detail and circumstance, is coercion and rape, though Chute never names it as such. It is clearly rape, but that reality is erased by Earlene's later marriage to Beal, and his continued representation as a sympathetic, if complicated, character. The encounter is prompted because Earlene has run away from home after a fight with her father. Beal picks her up while she's hitchhiking, and takes her back to Roberta Bean's home, his own place of refuge from the difficulties of his family. There, he leads her to the attic, full of Bean children (many his own, conceived with Roberta, his aunt), and

forces himself on her by quietly overwhelming her with his size and determination. Chute writes their sexual encounter without ominous cues that mark the scene as rape, including an interwoven flashback Earlene has of her Uncle Loren explaining to her how to survive a bear attack, which works as a metaphor for Earlene's survival of Beal's sexual assault. Chute writes,

He looks like an upright BEAR... He rubs his palms together, parts them, looks into them.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks.

He laughs. "Wicked work." He unlaces his boots.

Earlene watches the huge feet emerge. She says, "I ain't gonna do nuthin', you know...you know...with you." (168)

She sees him as dangerous, and this danger is conveyed in a specifically sexual context, when he laughs and tells her that he's thinking of "wicked work"--a reference to sex. It's important that she tells him no from the beginning. He has her lying on a pallet on the hard floor, where she is especially prone and without defense. Chute continues,

Somehow, when Beal straddles her, they miss the pallet, and Earlene's shoulders drive into the floor and the head of a nail. His body weighs it seems like a stack of bodies... Beal sniffs at her throat, blows into her yellow hair... "You can live through it," Uncle Loren had insisted. "The black bear is only curious. You just gotta remember: Never scream..." Beal arranges Earlene's hips with four or five powerful tugs, his vast and hairy front raking back and forth.

"But then"—Loren had sighed—"they been known to rip you up. They're a lot like a dog"... She screams in his face. (169)

The assault of Earlene by Beal is rape, yet Chute never names it as such; rather, her depiction of Beal remains sympathetic. She introduces him as a soft, emotional child, who cries in private. His masculine uncles think he's strange because he is so emotionally sensitive. Throughout his youth, Beal is also a semi-motherless child who seeks sanctuary with his aunt Roberta, with whom he conceives a number of children. The exact number of children they conceive together is unclear, since Roberta's character hinges on her excessive maternity and the innumerable children who follow and hang upon her. Even as Beal ages and himself becomes an angry Bean man, a younger version of his uncle Ruben, he is not portrayed as villainous. He is a persistent antagonist to Earlene, and eventually is her rapist, yet he's never portrayed as abusive. While Chute's perspective on her characters is compassionate, and I tend to agree with her overall sense of them as ordinary for that place and community, I find this encounter troubling.

Earlene gets pregnant from Beal's rape. The narrative breaks shortly after this is revealed, and flashes forward to a few years later, when Earlene's child, Bonny Loo, is acting as a nurse maid to her mother, who has fallen into a kind of depressive housebound hermitage. Like her own mother in the mental hospital, Earlene has developed an extreme agoraphobia, and relative immobility. She's been in bed in her room for an unspecified number of years. Beal makes a visit to Bonny Loo, and the two discuss Earlene's well-being. Beal peeks his head into Earlene's room:

His face whitens. He puts his ear to the door. 'I haven't seen her in a long time.

She doesn't like me,' he says.

Bonny Loo squints. 'QUEER, ain't she?'

He taps on the door. No answer.

Bonny Loo's eyes widen. 'Scary ain't it? Sometimes I figure she's dead by now.'...

'Earlene?' He whispers. A smell of darkness and stale food and of skin that sleeps and sleeps, never washes... and the haze of hundreds of cigarettes...leaps at the opening door.

'Gawd!' he says, pausing in the doorway.

'I TOLD ya,' says Bonny Loo.

The room is only big enough to hold a single bed, a sewing-machine table, and a couple of cereal bowls with crescents of bad milk, a saucer with uneaten toast, a water glass, a heaped ashtray. ..

Beal stares at Earlene with his mouth open.

Her yellow hair is matted, is almost like fingers around her ears, darkened by oils.

(177-178)

That Earlene's breakdown is caused by the trauma of her rape and consequent birthing of Bonny Loo is my own speculation—a probability complicated by her mother's similar mental health affliction. Regardless of the cause, Earlene's slip into isolation and filth reflects abjection as Earlene allows herself to essentially rot in her own bodily wastes, rarely moving from her bed. That Bonny Loo finds her "scary" and imagines that Earlene is on her death bed, near death, or might-as-well-be-dead further connects Chute's vision of underclassed people to ways of being that a number of scholars, those especially focused on working-class dignity, tend to deny. Earlene allows herself to become disgusting and filthy; she slips into abjection without resistance.

Lastly, Chute emphasizes the theme of bad motherhood, not through neglect and complicity with masculine abuse as in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, but by way of mental illness and disability, and animalistic maternal excess in the form of hyper-reproductivity. Abjected motherhood comes into play in Beans in a few key elements of the story. First, in the character

of Earlene's mother, who is unable to fulfill her traditional motherly role because she is mentally ill; her illness itself puts her in an abjected position. Similarly, Merry Merry, Beal's mother, is non-verbal and in some way intellectually disabled. She can't hold a conversation, nor can she care for her child. She's very easy to perceive as merely a vessel of flesh from which Beal is born and then separated from as in the Kristevan formulation. Earlene's mother and Merry Merry are abjected in both their invocation of animal and moral disgust. They fail at motherhood because of arguably unchangeable circumstances of mental illness and intellectual disability.

Abjected motherhood is also portrayed through Roberta Bean's excessive reproductivity. Roberta, Beal's aunt, apparently Merry Merry's sister, has an ever-growing number of children, many of whom are fathered by her nephew Beal. As previously mentioned, Chute characterizes Roberta and her brood as being dog-like, with multiple very young children hanging off of Roberta like puppies. Reviewers, Chute complains, misread Roberta as a "slut," which is an unfair assessment of the book's most sympathetic character.

Both *Bastard out of Carolina*, and *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* depict working-class people who live in a state of abjection because of their location in proximity to decay and death. Each in its own way shows characters identifying with abjection as a way of resisting normativity and forming community bonds. The abjection the texts pinpoint is in connection with the ugly, the gross and grotesque, and with non-normative family structures that center on failed and abjected motherhood. Both novels are regarded as working-class texts, though Allison's work is much more well-known than Chute's. In each, failure in its extreme form, as abjection, becomes a way for working-class people to resist normative moralism through identification with a community in abjection.

The novel *Push*, by Sapphire, resonates with *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* in its presentation of lives lived well below the poverty line, and its depiction of paternal incest. Nevertheless, it stands very nearly alone as a particularly controversial representation of poor black people, an already devalued and demoralized social group. It is polarizing in its portrayal of abjection in urban black lives. The novel was adopted by Oprah Winfrey as emblematic of an invisible but troubling reality of the excesses of poverty and the impact on society's most vulnerable. That is, it speaks to the plight of some young black women in poverty who've been underserved by the school and healthcare systems, and whose welfare and safety have slipped through the cracks, so to speak. Winfrey's interest in the book led to the making of the film *Precious*. Claireece Precious Jones, the main character in *Push*, is a significantly obese, illiterate teen mother who lives with her physically and emotionally abusive mother. Her first child, who was fathered by her own biological father, Carl Kenwood Jones, has Down's Syndrome, and she is pregnant with another child by him when she discovers, late in the text, that she is HIV positive. The novel is a literacy narrative, and hinges on the move out of abjection by way of literacy acquisition. Many of the obstacles in Precious's path to education are similar to the hardships and obstacles in the lives of the main characters in *Bastard out of Carolina* and *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*.

Just as in Dorothy Allison and Carolyn Chute's novels, Sapphire's work in *Push* depicts characters who are excessively "ugly" in the eyes of most. They are likewise trapped in close proximity to death and decay in their milieu of urban poverty. It also portrays an image of maternity that has become monstrous. Mary, Precious's mother, is frightening in her oscillation between cold lack of regard for and brutal abuse of her daughter, as well as her selfish and self-serving nature. The dysfunctionality of the generations of mothers in *Push* conveys abject and

"bad" motherhood of different kinds, with the effect of being both horrifying and familiar to many.

Precious's physical appearance is deemed ugly by others, because she is an obese, very dark-skinned, black woman. She and her mother Mary are repeatedly told they are ugly, primarily by men, but also by one another. Precious is taunted by her peers in school, especially young black men. During an early flashback to her pregnancy at age twelve, Precious describes a scene of boys laughing at her: "Boy say I'm laffing ugly. He say, 'Claireece is so ugly she laffing ugly,' His fren' say, 'No that fat bitch is crying ugly.' Laff laff. Why I'm about these stupid boys now I don't know" (12). Even though she's experienced persistent sexual abuse from her father, she still conveys an interest in fairly normative romantic relationships. She struggles with her attraction to people who find her abject. This scene takes place in a flashback within a flashback to a meeting with a hospital nurse who asks her, at age twelve, to discuss her family, upbringing, and the fact of her father's abuse after she has just given birth.⁶⁸ Because she flashes back to the boys' cruelty to her at the moment in which she is forced to reveal what for most would be a source of significant shame (incest and pre-teen pregnancy), a connection is drawn between the external influence of bullying and harassment from her peers with regard to her appearance and the abuse she faces because of it. Black women, especially those living in poverty, are often devalued in mainstream society as less-than human, because of their distance from and abuse by positions of power. Precious's dehumanization is exacerbated by her physical appearance and by her illiteracy.

So it is Precious's blackness, her womanness, and her "ugliness", as well as her poverty that push her into abjection and cause her abuse to be invisible and unthinkable. Yet to her, these

⁶⁸ Time is mercurial in the novel, since very nearly everything Precious does triggers her trauma, and she flashes back.

things are the status quo. The normative, non-abjected, outside world is alien to Precious. The social abjection Precious experiences because of her appearance is part of her painfully abusive entanglement with her mother Mary, with whom she lives. Precious and Mary's "ugliness" is as interwoven as their economic situation. They debase and devalue one another because they are debased and devalued by the outside world.

Precious thinks of her mother as ugly when she is reflecting on the pain of her physical and mental abuse, and her rage toward her mother for being so cruel to her. The rage she expresses manifests in subtle, almost pre-cognitive ways. Toward the beginning of the narrative, a counselor from Precious's high school, Mrs. Lichtenstein, visits the Jones household uninvited and unannounced. First, Precious and Mary assume that the person ringing the bell is a crack addict trying to get inside the apartment building. She explains, "I hate crack addicts. They give the race a bad name" (14). This ironic positioning of crack addicts as the Other to their abjected position precedes a brief but telling description of Mary's immobility and superficial dominion over the home. This is a reflection on Mary's violence that causes Precious to unthinkingly grab a kitchen knife, daydreaming about self-defense: "'Go tell them assholes to stop ringing the bell,' she say. She closer to the door than me but I mean my mover don't move 'less she has to. I mean that. When I go to answer the buzzer I realize I'm still grabbing the knife. I hate my muver sometimes. She is ugly I think sometime" (14). Here, the assertion of Mary's ugliness is more piercing than her preparation to meet her mother's violence with the knife. Unlike in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, in which shared family ugliness is a celebrated trait and resistive mode of identification, Precious and Mary share the trait of ugliness and despise it in one another and in themselves.

As in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, hereditary ugliness carries down to the youngest generation in the character of Precious's first child, her daughter, born with Down's Syndrome, who she names Lil' Mongo, short for Little Mongoloid. Precious is twelve when Lil' Mongo is born. In a flashback to the birth of her daughter, Precious describes how the kind, light-skinned "Nurse Butter" breaks it gently to her that the newborn has a problem:

"Something is wrong with your baby," Nurse Butter make talk like how pigeons talk, real soft, coo coo, "but she's alive. And she's yours." 'N she hand me baby. Baby's face is smashed flat like pancake, eyes is all slanted up like Koreans, tongue goin' in 'n out like some kinda snake..."Mongoloid," other nurse say. Nurse Butter look hard at her. (17)

Here, Precious's lack of worldly knowledge, made clear by the harsh, dehumanizing language she uses to describe her child, is palpable. It is not merely that her speech mimics her mother's demeaning diction and tone. Her internal monologue that creates and reflects her understanding of the world is based on the violent way of speaking and thinking that she has always heard. She perceives the world and people in terms of their relationship to and variation upon Otherness and ugliness. Rather than seeing her baby as special (why should she as a 12-year-old victim of incest?) she perceives the baby's defects without any filter of "political correctness" (which is probably better described as something like sensitivity or "informed respectfulness"). The uncouth way she talks about her child does not, however, indicate a lack of love. Precious is not reclaiming ugliness, she simply has no linguistic tools for processing the phenomenon of her daughter's birth or Down's Syndrome any differently.

As Nurse Butter continues to console and care for twelve-year-old Precious, the baby's "ugliness" emerges as a sorrowful reality, rather than the nearly ecstatic bond that it is in *Bastard*

out of Carolina. Precious remembers: "I crying for ugly baby, then I forget about ugly baby, I crying for me who no one ever hold before. Daddy put his pee-pee smelling thing in my mouth, my pussy, but never hold me. I see me, first grade, pink dress dirty sperm stuffs on it. No one comb my hair" (18). Though Lil' Mongo is "ugly," as are Precious and her mother Mary, she is so in a different way because of her Down's Syndrome. Precious cries for the loss and pain this represents for her, and for how difficult Lil' Mongo's life will be. However, despite the baby's appearance and syndrome, the image of the six-year-old Precious Jones with her hair uncombed and soiled with her father's sperm is much more horrific than that of the "mongoloid" baby to whom Precious gives birth. Just as there is nothing especially abjected about the sexualization of young girls or patriarchal abuse, there is similarly not a resistive abjection in a child's birth defect, likely made more probable through incest and pre-teen motherhood.

Precious and Mary's general ugliness has no resistive traction vis-a-vis identity or familial recognition. It is inflected by both race and colorism. Precious Jones persistently compares her experience to the idea she has in her mind about whiteness and privilege. Ugliness is not a bonding agent connecting Precious to a community or offering some kind of visibility, as it is for the Boatwrights in Dorothy Allison's novel or the Bean family in Chute's work. Her ugliness is connected to her racial otherness as well as her economic status. She is ugly in comparison with the social ideals of whiteness, lightness, thinness, education, and wealth. She explains, "I big, I talk, I eats, I cooks, I laugh, watch TV, do what my muver say. But I can see when the picture come back I don't exist. Don't nobody want me. Don't nobody need me. I know how I am. I know who they say I am—vampire sucking the system's blood. Ugly black grease to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, find a job for." (31). At another point in the text, she refers to herself as a "black monster" as seen through the eyes of her schoolmates (62). There is

no way for Precious to use this perception people have of her to form a resistive self-image or identity. Her ugliness in the eyes of even those in her community isolate her and diminish her sense of self.

Push shares with *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* some of the fascination with living in squalor and filth, and the proximity of poverty to effluvia and abjected materials—bodily waste and excretions of the female body, particularly related to genitals and giving birth. The incredibly early sexualization of Precious, which she describes graphically in flashbacks, causes real trauma to her body. In particular, she loses control of her bladder in moments of social tension or anxiety. Her loss of bodily control occurs specifically in classrooms. These spaces are where she feels the most pressure and judgment from the outside, even though it is also her best and most sustained escape from the abuse she faces in her home. She tells the reader in the first paragraphs of the first chapter that she was held back in school early on: "when I was seven, 'cause I couldn't read (and I still peed on myself)" (3). Her narrative from this point on shows how inextricable her educational experience has been from her life as an incest and paternal rape survivor. It isn't clear until a bit later that her incontinence is a result of trauma from rape. As she walks into the building for her first day of school at Each One Teach One, she flashes back to the second grade, the year her father's sexual abuse increases in frequency and intensity, and the year her education is stifled. She relates:

Second grade I is fat. That's when fart sounds and pig grunt sounds start. No boyfriend no girlfriends. I stare at the blackboard pretending. I don't know what I'm pretending...sitting in my chair at my desk and the world turn to whirring sound everything that is noise, teacher's voice white static. My pee pee open hot stinky down my thighs ssssss splatter splatter. I wanna die hate myself HATE

myself. Giggles giggles but I don't move I barely breathe I just sit. They giggle. I stare straight ahead. They talk me. I don't say nuffin'.

Seven, he on me almost every night. First it's just in my mouth. Then it's more more. He is intercoursing me. Say I can take it. Look you don't even bleed, virgin girls bleed. You not virgin. I'm *seven*. (38-39)

In this flashback, her "ugliness" is compounded by incontinence and the stink of urine and other waste on her body.

In this pivotal moment in Precious's life, in which she finds a community of similarly (if not as intensely) devalued and deprived women who become her support system and source of love over time, she flashes back to the point in her life—the second grade, age seven, losing her virginity to paternal rape—wherein her abjection impeded her acquisition of literacy and set forth a life trajectory of compounding disenfranchisement. This abjection is exemplified by her loss of bladder control, and her henceforth persistent navigation of her life covered in urine and repelling the people around her with whom she might otherwise have felt some sense of community. She finds a group of similarly marginalized people at the Each One Teach One program with whom she can connect.

Unlike Chute, Sapphire doesn't spend time describing the living quarters of Precious and Mary, or any other person. That Mary is on welfare should not be construed as evidence that the space they live in is unkempt, though we know that Mary very rarely moves from her couch in front of the television set. Still, Precious is held in servitude to Mary, in which she is expected to cook all her mother's food. One guesses that she's expected to clean as well, though it is not explicitly stated. This responsibility is paired with Mary commanding Precious to overeat—likely in order to keep Precious on the same life path as she, toward obesity and immobility.

Carolyn Chute's points about readerly assumptions are apt here. Some readers might assume the apartment is dirty simply because it is in government housing, but there is actually no textual evidence to suggest this (unlike in *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*).

Sapphire does situate her readers into proximity with her characters' unhygienic and unsanitary bodies, however. Both Allison and Chute do this as well, but Sapphire's focus is much more acutely narrowed upon the bodily waste and the already-shameful, both abject and fetishized, sex organs of people of color, especially the female-bodied.⁶⁹ Precious relates:

I sit her pies down on the tray. Try not to look at her. Try to watch the white people on TV running on the beach sand. Try not to see grease running down Mama's chin, try not to see her grab whole hammock wif her hand, try not to see myself doing the same thing...I feel Mama's hand between my legs, moving up my thigh. Her hand stop, she getting ready to pinch me if I move. I just lay still, keep my eyes close. I can tell Mama other hand between her legs now 'cause the smell fill room. Mama can't fit into bathtub no more...Mama's hand creepy spider, up my legs, in my pussy. (21).

Precious subsists in a sphere of intense feminine acrimony, between herself and her mother, and built out of hearing and seeing Mary's hatred of other women in general. For instance, Precious thinks about the names she wants to call Mrs. Lichenstein when she is first expelled from her school: "What's with this cunt bucket? (That's what my muver call women she don't like, cunt buckets. I kinda get it and I kinda don't get it, but I like the way it sounds so I say it too)" (7). Mary's misogynist language imitates the social expectation that women compete for men's

⁶⁹ I am thinking here of the number of "scientific studies" performed on African slaves and other black people during the 18th and 19th centuries, most notably the abuse suffered by Sartjie Baartman at the hands of "researchers."

attention, though between Precious and Mrs. Lichenstein, it is also amplified by race and education.

It is not clear whether Precious's repeated expressions of disgust at Mary's genital odor are statements of her actual condition, or regurgitations of white chauvinist linguistic turns and the social disdain for the normal working of female sex organs. Either way, Precious expresses in visceral terms Mary's poor genital hygiene. The abjection of this is compounded by the fact that the odor fills the room as Mary begins to sexually molest Precious. This passage is one of several crisp descriptions of abuse that Precious experiences from her mother, but it is the only one of a sexual nature. The image of grease running down Mary's chin as she eats ham hocks (a cheap, fatty food associated with poverty and black culture) is meant to incite disgust at her excess eating and her corpulence. Then Precious—the novel's protagonist—explains that she is the same.

Though we are meant to sympathize with Precious, she explains that she, too, eats ham hocks with her hands, has grease dripping down her chin, and is on her way to becoming as obese as her mother. This makes it more complicated to simply judge Mary as a villain, though she is extremely physically and sexually abusive and complicit with the paternal abuse of her daughter.

The effect of Mary's poor genital hygiene on the enclosed space she and Precious occupy is comparable to the squalor and rusted-out rot of the scenes of living in *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*. In Chute's novel, the poverty of the Beans' residences—dirty floors, tarpaper walls, board slats on the floor with nails sticking up threatening tetanus and other infection—helps express the dire nature of Earlene's circumstances, and indicate that she is stuck, in many ways, in her position. The previously discussed unnamed obese man who died from rotting in his chair

seemingly became both a kind of living furniture and a living gravesite, around which his cohabitators navigated lives. They must have developed over those two years an insensitivity to the stench of his urine, feces, and rotting flesh, as well as the (surely to some degree evident) presence of maggots and other scavenging insects feeding on him and his waste products. Similarly, the immobile Mary, though in nowhere near as advanced or horrific a circumstance as the man in the chair, is a brutal and poisonous entity around whom Precious must live. Yet, Mary and Precious, like the man in the chair and his housemates, are human beings, not furniture. The code inspector from the man's case was wrong, then. Humans can and do live in this kind of filth, often neither by choice nor with any notable resistance.

Again, because Kristeva's foundational work on theorizing abjection focuses so much on motherhood and the intrinsic abjection thereof, discussing how motherhood is depicted in *Push* is appropriate. The classed nature of maternity shows in all three novels. Likewise, the thread of "bad" mothers that runs through the texts adds a layer of abjection by presenting motherhood without the sterilizing expectations of a mother's nurturing care and protection. I do not mean that Kristeva is right about abjection being innate in motherhood, though it may be that Oedipal structures and misogyny create a sense of women's bodies in the reproductive process as abjected. Similarly, I am not arguing that nurturing care and protection are part of the absolute nature of motherhood, nor should they be. This discussion is meant purely to note the moralistic expectation of mothers to be so, and what occurs when mothers are not this way. I may appear to reproduce what I am critiquing here with regard to patriarchal abuse of women by not discussing it at length—and by relegating it to the normative and non-abject social world. Nevertheless, because I am not arguing that what is abject socially ought or ought not to be so, but rather pointing to the classed nature of certain abject circumstances, my not attending to what is awful,

yet normative (paternal sex abuse and men's rape of women) is done to point out how men's abuse of women is ideologically parallel with normativity.

Precious's mother Mary is abusive, vindictive, and painfully ignorant. She molests, beats, and degrades her daughter regularly (21, 59). When Precious goes into labor with her first child at age twelve, Mary knocks Precious to the ground and kicks her in the side of her head repeatedly, until she is rescued by Mz. West, a neighbor. Mary calls Precious a whore, a slut, and a tramp for being raped by her father, rather than seeking justice and protection for her child against rape. She rails at Precious: “‘You fuckin’ cow! I don’t believe this, right under my nose. You been high tailing it round here” (9). For unclear reasons, Mary does not perceive Precious's experiences of sexual abuse by her own boyfriend and Precious's biological father, Carl Kenwood Jones, as instances of Precious's victimization and exploitation. Rather, she accuses her daughter of seducing and stealing her man. For Mary, the contest between them pertains in some way to which one of them is the least ugly.⁷⁰ This, for my purposes, is abjection, based on the sheer moral disgust it evokes.

Abuse by women, especially of other women and of biological children, however, is anathema to the social mores and expectations of femininity, womanhood and maternal nature. Someone like Mary is widely held as unthinkable. That she allows her boyfriend to rape her child and doesn't seem to comprehend the act as either rape or egregious abuse, is shocking for many readers. However, her character bespeaks a social positionality that, though perhaps rare, is marked by race and class abjection.

⁷⁰ In the film adaptation of *Push*, entitled *Precious*, the character of Mary is presented in a slightly more sympathetic manner than in the book. In the film, Mary breaks down and cries about her daughter's abuse at the hands of her father, and provides an explanation of how she became desensitized to it. This scene does not rescue Mary from moral judgment (nor do I suggest that it should), but it humanizes her as a mother in a way that the book does not.

Mary not only doesn't protect Precious from Carl, she delivers her to him. Therefore, as Precious tells us, Mary is not ignorant about Precious's pregnancy with her second child by Carl as she was with the first. Precious tells us that "this time I know Mama know. Ummn hmmn, she know. She bring him to me. I ain't crazy, that stinky hoe give me to him. Probably, thas' what he require to fuck her, some of me" (24). This is the most heartbreaking instance among several in the book that indicate Mary's thinking about Precious as not a human being, let alone her child, but rather as a bartering tool to get things that she wants. It also indicates less explicitly Mary's perception of herself as a negotiation piece by and for men. This is probably more of a moralist issue than one of abjection, but it connects to abjection by way of the tendency to impose the moral as a way to cover or erase it. Again, taking an anti-moralistic tack with regard to Mary does not mean that she is right or justified in her abuse of Precious, but that her abuse has a classed affect on Precious, regardless of whether or not it is moral.

Mary uses Precious and Lil' Mongo so that she can keep her welfare income. We learn early on of Mary's concern with staying on welfare—seemingly above all else. She does not want Mrs. Lichtenstein at the house because having "white shit like Mrs. Lichtenstein social worker teacher ass nosing around" could cause problems for her in terms of income: "My muver don't wanna get cut off, welfare that is" (15). Here, Mary's apparent self-centeredness shows; she does not seem to care about the welfare of her daughter or her new granddaughter, who will require special care. Precious explains, "After I come home from hospital baby go live over on 150th and St. Nicholas Ave with my grandmother, even though Mama tell welfare the baby live with us and she care of it while I'm in school" (19). The welfare check, one assumes, remains with Mary, rather than being spent to care for the baby. There is very little indication in the novel as to how well the grandmother takes care of Lil' Mongo, or how they spend their days.

Unfortunately, Mary's behavior falls in line with the stereotype of black women on welfare. This is the prevailing cultural image of the black woman who refuses to work out of laziness and entitlement, and who repeatedly gets pregnant and has children in order to increase and maintain a government paycheck. This image is a fantasy—a generalization built from distrust and simplistic observations of urban poor black culture derived from and in response to the Moynihan report of the 1960s, as well as the economic policies targeting urban poor communities of color since the Reagan administration. Mary is not a stand-in for black motherhood in general (no one is), nor is Carl representative of black manhood, but their experience is part of a possible world that becomes invisible behind the moralizing response to abjection.

Mary's selfishness and abusive nature do not have a specific source in the novel, but we are encouraged to imagine that her childhood was something like Precious's. That is, she likely has a history of abuse and degradation associated with a family cycle of misery. Throughout the novel, Mary displays consistent harshness and anger, with no evident compassion or empathy. However, Sapphire does not paint Mary as purely a villain. She and her behavior are horrific in terms of what we see and understand as normal. She is all the things a person should not be in terms of social norms: obese, "ugly," abusive, ignorant, female, and black. What little she has she is gluttonous of. Still, until she goes to school at Each One Teach One, Precious is headed toward a similar life.

Precious has a moment in which she reveals the circumstances of her life with clarity. She explains her relationship with Mary:

After my baby come and me come out the hospital my muver take us down to welfare; say I is mother but just a chile and she taking care of bofe us'es. So really

all she did was add my baby to her budget. She already on the 'fare wit' me so she just add my daughter. I could be on the 'fare for myself now, I think. I'm old enuff. I'm 16. But I'm not sure I know how to be on my own. I have to say sometimes I hate my muver. She don't love me. I wonder how she could love Little Mongo (thas my daughter). Mongo sound Spanish don't it? Yeah, thas why I chose it, but what it is is short for Mongoloid Down Sinder, which is what she is; sometimes what I is. I feel so stupid sometimes. So ugly, worth nuffin'. I could just sit here everyday wif the shades drawed, watching TV, eat, watch TV, eat. Carl come over fuck us'es... School gonna help me get up out dis house...I go splash some water on my ass, which mean I wash serious between my legs and underarm. I don't smell like my muver. I *don't*. (35-36)

The moment in which she explains that Mary does not love her is powerful because it is followed by a clear picture of the deep impossibility of normative love here. Maternal love as a sheltering, protective force is not absent in poor black lives in general, but it is absent between Precious and Mary. Ultimately, Precious and Mary are portrayed as stuck mutually together in a social space with no room for love or joy until literacy education comes in. This is not meant to be understood, I think, as representative of typical family dynamics of poor black people, though in general, class and race affect the quality and expense of one's education. The circumstances Sapphire presents are nevertheless possible and real, and made invisible by moralism on the one hand, and the romanticizing of failure on the other.

The novels *Bastard out of Carolina*, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, and *Push* share the trope of abjection on varying levels. The characters portrayed in the texts are working-class people living primarily in poverty. In each work, the main character has a close relationship with

abjection, and lives in proxemic nearness to abjected substances, bodies, and behaviors. In the case of Allison's work, abjection in the forms of ugliness, gross substances, and death are part of the main character Bone's queer becoming. Her mother, whose ultimate failure to protect her daughter or enact redress for Daddy Glen's rape, is a highly abjected instantiation of the mother-child relationship. Bone doesn't forgive Anney, but she accepts her, which counters moralist expectations and shows Bone's connection to abjection as an identificatory site. Similarly, Earlene Pomerleau begins her relationship with the Bean family by watching in simultaneous disgust and attraction as they live like animals, in her and Chute's words, and in the unhygienic dirt and grime of their disfigured bodies—which take Janet Zandy's markers of laborer's bodies beyond the point of working nobility—dilapidated homes, and junked-filled lands.

Sapphire's *Push*, in dealing with urban black poverty, presents characters in circumstances that do not afford class rebellion or resistive failure. They live as abjected people in solitary isolation, and cannot use their supposed ugliness or dirtiness to form a bond with one another. Their abjection separates them from each other, as well as from their community and the broader society. Precious does regain a sense of self and identity later in the novel, but it is not through abjection, it is through literacy. The differences between *Bastard out of Carolina* and *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* on the one hand, and *Push* on the other, strongly signify the usefulness of queer analysis in working-class scholarship, and the necessity of class and intersectional analysis in queer theory. Queer theories of failure and abjection open up new ways to read Allison's and Chute's characters' working-class modes of living and identifying as resistive. Conversely, the same understanding of failure and abjection as resistive and anti-normative in queer theory could not properly make sense of a text like Sapphire's *Push* without intersectional and class analysis.

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